Discursive entrepreneurship: Ethical meaning-making as a transformative practice for sustainable futures

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Abstract

Humanity inhabits a discursive landscape that stimulates our imaginations, guides and influences our behaviour, shapes our ideas of what is possible and governs what we perceive as normal. The collective human imagination is currently dominated by a discourse of *neoliberal capitalism* that contributes to global sustainability challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss by framing nature as a resource to be exploited in service of perpetual growth in economic activity. Transformation towards flourishing, sustainable futures will not be possible without transformation of this dominant discourse. Alternative discourses exist but little is known about how to proactively and ethically pursue transformation of dominant discourses. In response, this paper develops a conceptual framework to guide an ethical practice of meaning-making towards discursive transformation. It introduces 'discursive entrepreneurship', defined as the practice of creating, performing and transforming memes, stories, narratives and discourses to promote a desired structure of the discursive landscape. Normative strategies for discursive entrepreneurship are identified from a systematic review of recent literature on how social-ecological stories, narratives and discourses evolve and change. The paper clarifies the often-inconsistent terminology used to define these ideational concepts, arguing for a nested relationship between discourses, narratives, stories and memes. Further, it shows how discursive entrepreneurs can engage in iterative strategies of deconstruction, reframing, construction, performance, connection and collaboration to increase the chances that

their meanings will reach audiences, be heard by them, be retold and perhaps contribute to the emergence of inclusive, life-affirming discourses.

Keywords: meaning-making; discursive entrepreneurship; transformation; sustainability; discourse; narrative; meme.

1 Introduction

Faced with escalating threats to the sustainability of human and other life on our planet, many scholars now argue that a transformative response is essential (Fazey et al. 2018a, b; Future Earth 2020; Scoones et al. 2020). While there is no consensus on what is meant by transformations towards sustainability (Linnér and Wibeck 2019; Scoones et al. 2020), most scholars use the term to point to the scale and breadth of changes needed to achieve a sustainable relationship between people and planet. Transformation implies 'profound and enduring non-linear systemic changes, typically involving social, cultural, technological, political, economic, and/or environmental processes' (Linnér and Wibeck 2019, p. 4).

The above definition draws attention to the role of social and cultural processes in transformations towards sustainability. Understanding how transformation might be pursued in practice requires consideration of these processes. One way to explore such processes is through the lens of discourse. Humans inhabit a discursive landscape that stimulates our imagination, influences our identity, behaviour and social relations, and shapes what we see as normal and possible. Discourses permeate our media and culture, economies, institutions, organisations and technological systems. They have a tangible influence in the world, shaping our thoughts, attitudes, social practices and individual actions. Transformations towards sustainability will inevitably involve discursive transformations. Proponents of transformation may be more effective if they understand how to proactively and ethically intervene in the discursive landscape.

Discourses enable and constrain. The meanings they carry and narratives they contain allow us to learn from the past, make sense of a complex present, and imagine an uncertain future (Augenstein and Palzkill 2016; Harris 2017). They can open up new possibilities and make them feel tangible, accessible and real. However, they also impose limits on imagination, thought and action. They can persist long after their original purpose has been achieved, perpetuating thinking and action that creates and exacerbates problems. They can promote interests, goals, and values that benefit a minority and diminish equity and sustainability. Discourses can undermine our sense of individual and collective agency and make the 'end of the story' seem inevitable.

The discursive landscape today is dominated by a discourse of *neoliberal capitalism*, that is committed to endless economic growth and frames free markets, competition, small government and private ownership of capital as key strategies for achieving such growth (Waddock 2016; Healey and Barish 2019; Riedy 2020). It defines nature as a commodity to be freely exploited and ignores degradation of the Earth when measuring economic activity (Waddock 2016). As a result, neoliberal capitalism provides discursive impetus for the destruction of nature and other commons (Beling et al. 2018; Healey and Barish 2019). This is deeply problematic for transformations towards sustainability as neoliberalism is 'the operating system on which academia, policy, philanthropy, media, and politics run, and [its] assumptions remain the starting point for many policy debates' (Wong 2020, p. 12). It creates a hostile discursive environment for initiatives pursuing sustainable futures. Responding effectively to

sustainability challenges will require transformation of this dominant discourse (Pesch 2015; Waddock 2016; Narayanan and Adams 2017).

History demonstrates that dominant discourses can transform but there is little integrative scholarship on how to proactively pursue transformation towards discourses that value sustainability (Waddock 2016). Further, the question of how to pursue discursive transformation ethically is underexplored. Blythe et al. (2018) note that there are latent risks in the discourse of transformation. Those seeking to transform dominant discourses run the risk of imposing discursive change on people that have not asked for it and may not welcome it. Therefore, this paper develops a conceptual framework to support and guide sustainability scientists and practitioners to ethically pursue discursive transformations towards sustainability. Section 2 briefly describes the methods – a systematic literature review followed by specific conceptual development work. Section 3 presents conceptual features of the discursive landscape as a necessary foundation for the conceptual framework. Section 4 brings this framework to life by defining a social practice of meaning-making at the heart of discursive transformation. Section 5 builds on these foundations to introduce the idea of 'discursive entrepreneurship', defined as the practice of creating, performing and transforming memes, stories, narratives and discourses to promote a desired structure of the discursive landscape. An important theme in this section is how to pursue discursive entrepreneurship ethically, working towards normative sustainability goals. Section 6 concludes with a research agenda for further development of the concept and practice of discursive entrepreneurship.

2 Methods

The development of the conceptual framework began with a systematic review of scholarly literature (journal articles and book chapters) that explicitly engaged with changes in the discursive landscape, in the context of sustainability and environmental challenges. Literature searches were conducted in *Web of Science* and *Scopus* and limited to article titles to manage volume and increase relevance. Article titles needed to include words from all of the three search strings shown in Table 1. Given that scholarly interest in transformation is relatively recent, and to keep the body of literature manageable, the initial search covered the three most recent years – 2017 to 2019. After removal of duplicates and items that were not journal articles or book chapters, 253 articles were identified. The abstracts were reviewed, and articles were excluded that did not actively discuss change in the discursive landscape, leaving 47 relevant articles. These articles were read in full to identify how each article theorised the features of the discursive landscape, the agents or structures identified as playing a role in discursive change, and explicit or implicit theorisation of discursive change processes. Analysis was inductive, with codes and categories emerging from the literature and gradually consolidated as more articles were read. The intent was to look for consistencies in the literature that could provide a foundation for a common conceptual framework for discursive transformation.

Instead, the initial review found inconsistent and conflicting terminology that hindered the emergence of a coherent conceptual framework for discursive transformation. In response, three bodies of literature were added. First, seven items were added that filled evident gaps in the initial literature or were frequently cited by core articles. Next, the time period used in the search was expanded to cover 2015 and 2016. To keep the volume of additions manageable, articles found through this search were read in order of citation count with the intention of stopping once saturation was reached, which in this case would be the point at which a coherent conceptual framework became apparent. The conceptual framework emerged after adding six articles with ten or more citations, giving a total of 60 items for the systematic review. Finally, material from purposive searches was added to flesh out details of the emergent conceptual framework. These additions were made when concepts were evident in the reviewed literature but could be better described using other literature. For example, the concept of memes appeared infrequently in the systematic search and additional literature was included to explain the concept (e.g. Dawkins 1976). Selected review items are cited in the paper; the full list of reviewed items and an overview table is available in the Electronic Supplementary Material.

3 Features of the discursive landscape

Establishing a coherent conceptual framework for discursive transformation is hindered by terminological confusion. Describing the practices and strategies that discursive entrepreneurs use is difficult without agreement on how to describe the

space in which they are acting. This paper uses the term 'discursive landscape' to define a cultural space – a landscape of meaning made up of imaginative, symbolic and ideational resources. Although not visible, it affects the material world, and is affected by it (Harris 2019). The reviewed literature uses diverse, overlapping and contradictory terminology to refer to this discursive landscape (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017). The terms most frequently used as a core descriptive concept are narratives (29 articles), stories (14), discourses (13), frames (6), memes (3) and metaphors (2). While discourse is not the most frequently used term, it is the most encompassing and became the primary category underpinning the conceptual framework. This section defines terms and their relationship to each other as a foundation for the conceptual framework.

3.1 Discourse

A discourse is 'a web of meanings, ideas, interactions and practices that are expressed or represented in texts (spoken and written language, gesture, and visual imagery), within institutional and everyday settings' (Bischoping and Gazso 2015, p. 129). Multiple discourses exist and, for those who inhabit them, constitute 'a shared way of apprehending the world' (Dryzek 2013, p. 9), containing a 'story-line' (Hajer 1995) that gives a particular meaning to social and physical phenomena and a set of assumptions about the way the world is.

Discourses are dynamic and contextual, which means that what is labelled as a discourse varies depending on author objectives and scale. The introduction to this

paper describes a prominent discourse – neoliberal capitalism – that is global in scale and often referenced with critical intent, due to its dominance and negative impacts on sustainability and social justice. Another large-scale example is Stevenson's (2019) identification of three discourses of green political economy that are relevant to international analyses of political progress on sustainability: *Radical Transformationism*; *Cooperative Reformism*; and *Statist Progressivism*. However, discourses can also be identified at very local scales. An example is García Lozano et al. (2019), which explores the construction of discourse in a Mexican fishing cooperative.

Although dynamic, discourses can persist due to processes of structuration and institutionalisation (Pesch 2015; Lucas and Warman 2018; Pascoe et al. 2019a). Authors described particularly persistent discourses as dominant discourses (Pascoe et al. 2019a), dominant cultural narratives (Brown 2017), hegemonic discourses (Hajer 1995; Harris 2017; Wagner and Payne 2017) and metanarratives (Boulton 2016; Narrative Initiative 2017). They are often supported by strong discourse coalitions, made up of powerful actors with common political interests, that use storytelling and other meaning-making practices to reproduce the terms of the discourse and entrench or 'lock in' their preferred storylines (Hajer 1995; Harris 2017; Lucas and Warman 2018; García Lozano et al. 2019). While this makes deliberate discursive change challenging (Hajer 1995), proponents of competing discourses can contest dominant discourses by building their own discourse coalitions and engaging in their own meaning-making.

3.2 Stories

Discourses convey meaning to their participants in many ways, but one of the most important is by sharing stories about the way the world is, or ought to be. A story describes a *sequence of events*, with a recognisable beginning, middle and end (Moezzi et al. 2017). Stories include *characters* or *actors* (e.g. heroes, villains and victims), a *setting* in which the story takes place, and a *plot* (Brown 2017; Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017), which is defined by Moezzi et al. (2017, p. 3) as 'an energy to move the narrative from beginning to end: something, somebody, or some state changes, and this has consequences'. Stories can be conveyed in many forms, including oral, written and performed. While a story is only one of several types of communication (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017), it is recognised in the literature as a particularly powerful form because humans think in stories, remember them, share them and use them to make sense of complexity and uncertainty (Harris 2017). Thus, storytelling is a key practice for those pursuing discursive transformation.

Discourses provide the shared social meaning that allows stories to be told and understood (Dryzek 2013; Pesch 2015), facilitating and including some stories while hindering or excluding others (Harris 2017). At the same time, as similar stories are told and retold, they lay down discursive assumptions that come to be seen as reality, rather than 'just stories' (Shenhav 2015).

3.3 Narratives

Narrative is a term used commonly but inconsistently in the literature. The most common use is as a synonym for story (e.g. Polletta et al. 2011). When authors distinguish between story and narrative, they position narrative as a more encompassing concept than story. Some define narrative as the cultural context within which stories are told, framed and interpreted, referring to social, cultural, collective, historical or master narratives that express a society's values and beliefs and shape storytelling (Shenhav 2015; Audley and Stein 2017; Narrative Initiative 2017; Thakhathi 2019; van der Leeuw 2019). Others define narrative as a 'system of stories' (Harris 2017; Narrative Initiative 2017; Bushell et al. 2017), with individual stories 'nested' within a larger narrative or composing that larger narrative.

Broader definitions of social, cultural and master narratives seem indistinguishable from definitions of discourse. For example, Shenhav's (2015, p. 34) definition of a master narrative as 'leading principles, widespread ideologies, or sociocultural perspectives from which stories in the social domain evolved' aligns with the definitions of discourse above. What distinguishes narratives from discourse in most definitions is that narrative has a sequential structure like a story, whereas discourse is a web of assumptions or meanings that is not arranged sequentially (Bischoping and Gazso 2015; Shenhav 2015).

Examples of narratives include Catholic and Evangelical interpretations of climate change in the Andes (Scoville-Simonds 2018), diverse policy narratives about the value

of beach nourishment in Sweden (Bontje et al. 2019), and narratives of *Distance*, *Vulnerability*, *Agency* and *Change* articulated by professionals working on climate change (Coulter et al. 2019).

3.4 Memes: The basic elements of meaning

Memes are the smallest elements of meaning in the discursive landscape (Waddock 2016; Chabay 2020). Originally introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) as a cultural analogy to the gene, a meme is a replicable unit of culture that moves from mind to mind. Memes replicate and spread when people use them to think and communicate. As they replicate, they may change, through accidental or conscious reinterpretation.

A meme has both *form* and *meaning*. The form is what we experience through our senses – linguistic constructions such as phrases that we see or hear, images that we see, songs we hear and so on. The *meaning* includes the chain of mental models and associations, beyond the literal form, that a meme activates in our minds. The meaning varies for different people, shaped by the discourses we inhabit. For example, the phrase 'sustainable development' (form) carries diverse meanings, with some seeing it as a positive goal and others as a way to perpetuate neoliberal goals and imperialism (Blühdorn 2017; Beling et al. 2018).

The literature rarely used the term meme, favouring terms such as frames (Boulton 2016; Flusberg et al. 2017; Ross and Rivers 2019), metaphors (Flusberg et al. 2017;

Mangat and Dalby 2018) and motifs (Moezzi et al. 2017). This paper argues that all of these are memes in the sense that they carry and activate particular meanings in the minds of those who are exposed to them.

In folkloristics, a ‘motif’ is ‘the smallest narrative element that persists in tradition’ (Moezzi et al. 2017, p. 8). Motifs include archetypal characters such as heroes and villains, common story tropes such as the ‘triumph of the weak’ (Moezzi et al. 2017) and familiar story structures such as the hero’s journey.

Metaphors are words or phrases applied to an object or action to which they are not literally applicable (Mangat and Dalby 2018). Metaphors allow people to understand abstract concepts in terms of more familiar, concrete objects. A well-known metaphor in climate change discourse is the *greenhouse effect*, which uses the familiar image of a greenhouse to help people grasp the intangible effect of particular gases on the Earth’s atmosphere. By using metaphors, communicators can encourage particular kinds of thinking and evoke desired meanings. The choice of metaphor can influence the effectiveness of attempts to persuade audiences to act on sustainability challenges (Flusberg et al. 2017; Mangat and Dalby 2018).

A final important type of meme is the frame. Whenever we communicate, we choose what to include and what to exclude – what is in the frame, and what is out of the frame. Framing is the choice of what to emphasise – ‘the strategic selection (conscious or not) of language features for a particular purpose’ (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017, p. 2).

Frames are communicative forms that evoke particular associations and 'set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it' (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017, p. 2). There have been numerous attempts to use frames to evoke different meanings in relation to climate change, such as *global warming*, *climate disruption* and *climate emergency*.

3.5 Summing up

Despite the diverse and conflicting terminology, a conceptual framework emerged that aligns with the majority view in the literature. This framework proposes a nested or layered relationship between memes, stories, narratives and discourses, characterised by an increasing degree of structuration, as shown in Figure 1. In this framework, memes are the basic meaningful content of discourses, narratives and stories. They are numerous, can circulate rapidly and are constantly evolving. Stories weave together selected memes to tell how particular characters in a specified context experience a sequence of events. Each performance of a story is unique. Narratives emerge from performance of many similar stories, like the tracks left when many people walk the same path. They have the same sequential structure as stories but are more persistent because they express the shared meanings of a group. Members of the group continually reproduce narratives through individual storytelling acts that reiterate or revise the meanings expressed in the group's social narrative. Finally, discourses are shared cultural structures that incorporate stories and narratives but also include

assumptions and meanings that are not arranged sequentially. The use of the term 'discursive landscape' in this paper therefore encompasses memes, stories and narratives, as these are embedded in discourses.

While Figure 1 shows a single discourse, we actually live in a complex landscape of competing, cooperating and overlapping discourses at multiple scales. There are dominant discourses and alternative discourses, and memes are shared between different discourses. Figure 1 is a static and structural view of the discursive landscape. Section 4 brings this landscape to life by considering the practice of meaning-making.

4 The practice of meaning-making

Having clarified the features of the discursive landscape, the next step in developing a conceptual framework for deliberate discursive transformation was to identify which agents or structures to include. Taken as a whole, the literature reiterated the duality of agency and structure as outlined in Gidden's (1984) theory of structuration. In brief, Giddens sought to resolve a longstanding debate in the social sciences between those who gave primacy to social structures such as discourses or institutions in explaining the social world, and those who gave primacy to the agency of actors. He argued that agents and structures mutually enact the social world. Agents create and reproduce social structures and their actions are simultaneously shaped by those structures. Giddens argued that the social sciences should study the social practices that emerge from this duality of agency and structure.

The review therefore looked for agents and structures that authors associated with discursive change. Most articles attributed agency to diverse human actors who create and change the discursive landscape, including scientists (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017), facilitators (O'Neil 2018), teachers (Fairfield 2018) and media communicators (Cody et al. 2017). Many authors also attributed agency to collective actors such as discourse coalitions (Lucas and Warman 2018; García Lozano et al. 2019) and organisations (Bushell et al. 2015; McGhie 2019). However, other articles took a more structural view, pointing to the constraining and enabling qualities of stories (Morris et al. 2019), discourses (Pascoe et al. 2019a) or the media environment (Cody et al. 2017; Smith 2017), and the narrative impact of disruptive events (Lucas and Warman 2018).

In sum, discourses and their component memes, stories and narratives are social structures (Brown 2017; Moezzi et al. 2017). Agents work within these discursive structures as meaning-makers (Boulton 2016; Hochachka 2019). Their agency is constrained by the discourses they inhabit and the memes they can access, but they can select, adapt and combine memes, tell stories and connect to existing narratives to promote meanings that matter to them (Shenhav 2015; Brown 2017; Moezzi et al. 2017; Bulfin 2017; Bontje et al. 2019). Figure 2 summarises this social practice of meaning-making (Shenhav 2015), which is at the heart of discursive entrepreneurship. It shows a meaning-making practitioner selectively drawing on their discursive environment to bring desired meanings to the fore. They (consciously or otherwise)

survey the discursive landscape and deconstruct (1[1]) the meanings carried by memes, stories and narratives to identify opportunities for strategic meaning-making. Then, in an act of framing (2), they choose appropriate memes to construct (3) their communication. Often, this communication is in story form because stories are memorable, readily transmissible and aligned with the way humans think. The meaning-maker performs (4) their story for an audience (Moezzi et al. 2017). If the story resonates with the audience, the component memes may be passed on, or reproduced (5), usually with some reinterpretation. This reproduction can reinscribe the existing discursive landscape or evolve it. Thus, discourses shape what stories can be told and, at the same time, are shaped by the stories that are told. The telling and retelling of a multiplicity of stories reproduces and evolves discourses (Shenhav 2015; Bushell et al. 2017).

In Figure 2, a single meaning-maker is shown for legibility, but there are actually numerous meaning-makers practicing simultaneously. These meaning-makers cooperate, compete and interact and their power to transform discourses is unequal. Celebrities, for example, have a significant influence over the meanings adopted by those who follow them through social and news media. Meaning-makers can increase their discursive power by forming discourse coalitions that work in concert to promote similar meanings (Hajer 1995).

[1] Numbers in parentheses correspond to the numbering shown in Figure 2.

Further, the audience is absent from Figure 2. Figure 3 introduces an iterative relationship between meaning-makers and audience that adds a new dimension to what is shown in Figure 2[2]. As already shown in Figure 2, meaning-makers perform (4) their meanings (for example, by telling a story) and, if the story appeals, the audience may retell or reproduce the story (5), becoming meaning-makers themselves. The first new element shown in Figure 3 is the potential for the meaning-maker to receive implicit or explicit feedback from the audience (6), which may lead them to revise future communication in response to that feedback, entering into a dialogue rather than a one-way communication. Second, Figure 3 captures the potential for the audience to exercise agency and connect a story to existing group narratives that might increase its salience. When audiences connect stories with narratives, they potentially amplify (7) the reach and resonance of the story and its component memes, spreading it to other audiences and increasing its likelihood to reproduce (5) and influence discourse. Finally, while many authors separate the roles of meaning-maker and audience, some explore a more collaborative relationship between audience and meaning-maker (8), which I will return to in Section 5.6.

[2] Figure 2 and 3 are two partial views of a single practice of meaning-making. As such, the numbering in Figure 3 carries on from the numbering in Figure 2. Performance and reproduction are the elements common to both views, hence the repetition of the numbers 4 and 5 across the two diagrams.

The combination of the concepts introduced in Section 3 and the meaning-making practice outlined here provided a consistent language for categorising the diverse theories of discursive change discussed in the literature. Section 5 completes the conceptual framework for discursive entrepreneurship by describing the numbered elements in Figures 2 and 3.

5 Discursive entrepreneurship: strategies for transformative meaning-making

Meaning-making practitioners seeking discursive transformation are entrepreneurial in the sense that they innovate, experiment, take risks and test memes in an often-hostile discursive landscape that resists change. The established concept of institutional entrepreneurship, defined as 'the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones' (Maguire et al. 2004, p. 657), provided a useful starting point for describing the practices of meaning-makers. However, meaning-making practitioners aim to transform the discursive landscape rather than institutions, so 'discursive entrepreneurship' is a more fitting label for their practice. Discursive entrepreneurship is the practice of creating, performing and transforming memes, stories, narratives and discourses to promote a desired structure of the discursive landscape. It includes six key strategies from Figures 2 and 3: *deconstruction* of the discursive landscape; *framing* a planned communication by selecting memes; *construction* of a communication (e.g. a story) from those memes; *performance* of that

communication and *connection* with audiences in the hope that memes will be transmitted and reproduced; and *collaboration* with audiences and other practitioners. These strategies are described below in normative terms, consistent with the goal of transformation towards sustainability. The hope is that articulation of these strategies will help more actors to successfully pursue discursive transformation in support of sustainable futures. Some ethical implications of each strategy are also identified as a starting point to support development of ethical approaches to discursive entrepreneurship.

5.1 Deconstructing the discursive landscape

Discursive entrepreneurs have at least an implicit model of the discursive landscape that informs their strategies for achieving desired discursive changes. These strategies need to engage with the political, contested and problematic nature of the discursive landscape (Boulton 2016; Mangat and Dalby 2018; García Lozano et al. 2019; Pascoe et al. 2019b). All meaning-making is political, as it foregrounds particular assumptions, characters and perspectives, and silences, neglects or backgrounds others (Shenhav 2015; Smith 2017; Pascoe et al. 2019b). The power relations that shape discourses may be so inscribed that they are rarely questioned, making conscious acts of *deconstruction* (1 in Figure 2) necessary to surface these relations and their impacts, and open up space for new meanings to emerge (Pesch 2015; Lucas and Warman 2018). It is only 'once disempowering narratives are deconstructed, [that] the work of reconstructing authentically empowering narratives begins' (Thakhathi 2019, p. 34).

Discursive entrepreneurs enter into 'a kind of discursive combat' (Ross and Rivers 2019, p. 990), where there is constant struggle to create new meanings, maintain existing discourses, or disrupt them (Bontje et al. 2019; Harris 2019; Riedy et al. 2019). Power differentials mean that some voices are amplified, and others marginalised. Dangerous untruths can be popularised and normalised (Boulton 2016). The telling and retelling of stories can 'lock in' discourses, which then resist dislodging (Pesch 2015; Shenhav 2015; Narayanan and Adams 2017; Lucas and Warman 2018). Discursive entrepreneurs can expect 'a hostile reaction to the construction of new narratives or to attempts to deconstruct or reconstruct existing narratives' (Shenhav 2015, p. 76). Failing to understand and reflect on this competitive and structured landscape may lead to new attempts at meaning-making being crushed under the weight of others.

Discursive entrepreneurs read and reflect on this discursive context to generate stories that strengthen their preferred discourses. They should be clear about the values and visions that drive their engagement with the discursive landscape so that they identify strategies that are consistent with these values. They may tell stories that actively critique and undermine competitor memes and discourses. They may also be skilled at identifying opportunities, such as disruptive events (Cody et al. 2017; Narayanan and Adams 2017; Lucas and Warman 2018; Roxburgh et al. 2019), that open up a window for discursive change. Finally, they are likely to participate in effective discourse coalitions (Hajer 1995), as the potential for any individual storyteller to achieve their discursive goals alone is small. A good example of storytelling emerging from

deconstruction is Bill McKibben's portrayal of the fossil fuel industry as the enemy of climate action, a radical discursive response to a locked in discursive landscape, which opened up space for more moderate views to legitimately enter the discourse (Schifeling and Hoffman 2019).

Deconstruction raises ethical challenges that remain prominent throughout any practice of discursive entrepreneurship. First, who has the right to decide that a discourse is problematic and needs deconstruction? Second, if you deconstruct the meanings that many hold dear and the certainty that comes with those meanings, what are you offering as a replacement? Realising that the discourses you subscribe to are problematic can be profoundly disorienting. It is therefore crucial that discursive entrepreneurs offer new meanings, new social structures and new opportunities for agency so that people can build new discourses when those around them are crumbling.

5.2 Framing and reframing

Discursive entrepreneurs engage in framing (2 in Figure 2) by choosing which memes to include and which to leave out, or what meanings to 'make salient' (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017; Harris 2017; Ross and Rivers 2019). Since memes gain power by inhabiting more minds, the incorporation of particular memes into stories, particularly stories that spread, can strengthen their role in the discourse. Most framing is

unconscious or routine, structured by the discourses the meaning-maker inhabits (Shenhav 2015) and the memes that are prominent in that discourse.

However, discursive entrepreneurs can act consciously to choose memes and language that reframe or re-story a situation, opening up potential for change (Audley and Stein 2017; Harris 2017; Riedy et al. 2019). This might involve choosing familiar memes with the intention of reworking, critiquing or combining them in novel ways, or drawing attention to unfamiliar memes that help an audience make sense of complex situations. It can also involve the choice of memes that have appeal across discourse boundaries as a strategy for expanding discourse coalitions (Augenstein and Palzkill 2016; Lucas and Warman 2018).

Often, discursive entrepreneurs seek to create and promote novel memes (Waddock 2016; Smith 2017; van der Leeuw 2019) as a way of attracting attention. Some create entirely new memes, as with Crutzen's (2006) coining of the term 'Anthropocene' to frame humanity as a force for change on a geological scale. More often, novelty means introducing or amplifying memes that are not well-known in that discourse, such as an idea from an adjacent field, a voice that is marginalised (Harris 2017), or a vision generated by imagining alternative realities in space and time (Mangat and Dalby 2018). The recent attention given to the Andean notion of '*buen vivir*' is a good example, bringing established ideas of good living and *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) from the Global South into wider discourse about transformations toward sustainability (Beling et al. 2018).

Acts of framing and reframing require imagination and reflection on the discursive context (1 in Figure 2) to theorise how an audience will react to memes. Boulton (2016) reviews and summarises research on effective framing in relation to communication on climate change, finding that effective frames: engage affect by connecting with emotions, values and identity (Bulfin 2017; Morris et al. 2019; Chabay 2020); contribute to a coherent narrative that is accessible for non-experts and helps the audience to imagine something new; are conceptually defensible; help to create dialogue or narrative bridging, rather than polarisation; and open up a bigger picture of new ways to be and think (see also Moezzi et al. 2017). Several authors argued that metaphors are particularly able to meet these requirements, allowing the audience to connect imagined futures with their present situation and to make sense of complex, intangible systems (Boulton 2016; Mangat and Dalby 2018).

Some practical examples of framing and reframing include: framing climate change as immediate and personal, instead of distant in time and space, to motivate action (Bushell et al. 2017; Bulfin 2017; Coulter et al. 2019); drawing attention to 'limits' as a way of unsettling economic and material growth assumptions (Smith 2017); framing the fossil fuel industry as the enemy of climate action (Mangat and Dalby 2018; Riedy et al. 2019; Schifeling and Hoffman 2019); translating the terms used to describe climate action to make it palatable to dominant discourses (Boas and Rothe 2016); reframing to promote and amplify positive and inclusive visions (McPhearson et al.

2016; McGhie 2019; Chabay 2020); and selecting memes that are locally resonant (Chabay 2020).

5.3 Constructing meanings

Discursive entrepreneurs *construct* (3 in Figure 2) forms of communication to carry their chosen memes to their desired audience. Very often, the form is a story. Bushell (2017, p. 41) calls this construction of a 'strategic narrative', that is 'consciously developed to achieve a social actor's aims, communicate a desired end state and the means of getting there'. However, discursive entrepreneurs also use other forms that do not have a narrative structure, such as information intended to educate (Morris et al. 2019), descriptive visions of the future designed to inspire (McPhearson et al. 2016), rhetoric designed to persuade (Mangat and Dalby 2018) or artistic expressions with diverse goals (Boulton 2016; Macintyre et al. 2019).

The communicative form is partly shaped by the goals, which might include helping an audience 'zoom out' and see the bigger picture, 'zoom in' to improve understanding of a particular context, 'zoom through' by deconstructing or looking below the surface, or 'zoom and hook' by capturing an audience and steering them towards particular actions (Moezzi et al. 2017). Only the last of these seeks a specific action; the first three all aim to open up questions or critique, although the discursive entrepreneur may theorise that such provocation will lead to change. Leaving the pathway to change somewhat open is consistent with the advice of experienced storytellers interviewed

by Harris (2019), who argued for telling ambiguous stories that provide the space for audiences to make their own interpretations and imagine their own responses, rather than telling them what to do. Stories often need to be subtle, artful and indirect (Moezzi et al. 2017), rather than didactic.

Whatever the strategy, a discursive entrepreneur seeks to package up memes into a communicable form that the audience finds compelling enough to experience, pass on to others, and act on. There is no shortage of advice on the construction of compelling or 'tellable' stories to reach a broader audience (Cron 2012; Shenhav 2015; Smith 2017; Harris 2019). Key elements include: building a clear and coherent plot with a plausible and believable flow from cause to effect (Brown 2017; Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017; Chabay 2020); including relatable characters (e.g. heroes and villains) (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017; Smith 2017); making larger concepts and themes relatable by embedding them in a familiar geographic and ideational setting (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017; Smith 2017; Bulfin 2017; Harris 2019; Chabay 2020); ensuring salience to current matters of social concern (Shenhav 2015); including an outcome that offers a moral lesson (Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017); and giving the audience efficacy and agency by creating space for them to play a role (Bushell et al. 2015, 2017; Audley and Stein 2017; Harris 2019).

5.4 Performing meanings

While the content of a story or argument is one determinant of its ability to spread and persuade, another is the way that it is *performed*, communicated or narrated for an audience (4 in Figures 2 and 3). Performing meanings in a way that increases their reach and ability to persuade requires understanding the audience. Discursive entrepreneurs need to make choices about when to perform, the form or medium through which they will perform, and who will do the performing. The rest of this section uses the example of a story, while noting that similar choices pertain to other communicative forms.

Audiences are demographically, ideologically, politically and psychologically diverse (Smith 2017; Hochachka 2019), making it unlikely that any single story will reach all desired audiences. Storytellers need to make strategic choices about who to reach, while recognising that others may interpret stories in different ways, some of which could be counterproductive for their overall goal. Storytellers never have perfect information about their intended audience, so storytelling is an action learning process (Smith 2017). As such, the relationship between storyteller and audience is best understood as a dialogue or conversation (Bushell et al. 2015; Augenstein and Palzkill 2016; Harris 2019) as shown in Figure 3, rather than a one-way transmission.

Stories are often told iteratively and repeatedly, with changes made for each telling in response to audience feedback (6 in Figure 3). The literature argues that storytellers need to listen as much as tell, to establish trust and connect with the language and

context of their audience (Harris 2019). Further, as discussed in Section 5.5, stories are interpreted by the audience to meet their own needs. Being more aware of these needs increases the likelihood that a story will connect rather than clash. Listening to existing stories can help storytellers to identify the narratives of diverse groups and then to craft stories to connect to these narratives, acting as a 'broker' across multiple discourses (Boulton 2016; Pascoe et al. 2019b).

Timing matters in storytelling, as the receptiveness of audiences to stories varies with time. In the Internet age, audiences must make active choices about which communications to pay attention to from the surplus available to them. People actively 'tune in' to stories that feel salient, personal and timely. In the literature, this is most often discussed in relation to disruptive climate events (Cody et al. 2017; Narayanan and Adams 2017; Lucas and Warman 2018; Roxburgh et al. 2019). At the time of such events, there is a window for new stories to reach an audience (Roxburgh et al. 2019). The agenda setting role of news media is also discussed (Wagner and Payne 2017; Smith 2017); when particular issues hit the news, fresh stories about those issues are actively sought. Further, there is evidence that an audience will be more likely to act in a desired way at times when it has already been primed with norms that are consistent with that action (Ebersbach and Brandenburger 2020).

The way in which a story is told also matters. A storyteller has numerous textual choices: oral, written or video forms; transmitted face-to-face, or through social media, or through heritage media; and so on. These choices matter if the desired

audience has preferences for particular forms. Each of these media makes different demands of the storyteller. For example: spoken forms may require the liberal use of rhetoric to engage the listener (García Lozano et al. 2019; Riedy et al. 2019); social media demands conciseness, portability and good image choices; and broadcast formats hinge on the perceived credibility of the storyteller (Smith 2017). Indeed, the choice of storyteller is important across all formats. An audience is more likely to listen to someone they see as part of their group. Storytellers frequently need to engage in collaboration and partnership with trusted and influential audience members to get their stories heard.

There is a risk that strategies of framing, construction and performance can be used in manipulative ways. Using knowledge of how memes, framing, storytelling and other communication strategies can motivate and persuade, discursive entrepreneurs can nudge audiences in desired directions without their explicit consent. The fact that advertisers, politicians and other public speakers engage in this kind of manipulation constantly does not make it less of an ethical minefield. Perhaps the most ethical response is to abandon identification as a wise change agent seeking to persuade an audience and to instead adopt a more collaborative and participatory approach, as discussed in Section 5.6.

5.5 Diffusion of meanings

Once performed, stories and memes diffuse through the discursive landscape in ways that a discursive entrepreneur cannot entirely control or predict (Audley and Stein 2017). The very act of communicating a meme subtly changes it through the specificity of the particular performance and by associating it with other memes, the communicator and the context in which it was encountered. Audiences then add their own interpretations, ascribing new meanings to memes, which then recirculate into discourses (5 in Figure 2). These altered memes evolve the discursive landscape, enabling other stories and narratives to grow. Audiences may retell stories, helping them to reach other audiences (7 in Figure 3) and increasing the likelihood that they will alter the discursive landscape. Audiences may make connections with familiar stories, interpreting new stories through the lens of established narratives. This familiarity may increase the likelihood that a story will be heard and replicated.

As these processes of mimetic diffusion are intangible, the literature turns to metaphors to make sense of them. Many describe stories and storytellers engaged in competition to inhabit the minds of the audience and win power struggles with other stories (Bontje et al. 2019; Ross and Rivers 2019). Authors write of 'discursive combat' (Ross and Rivers 2019), 'weaponized narratives' (Allenby and Garreau 2017), 'polarized discourses' (Lucas and Warman 2018), 'framing battles' (Boulton 2016) and occupying the 'radical flank' (Schifeling and Hoffman 2019). Sometimes, this conflict is internal, when authors wrote of the cognitive dissonance that a story can provoke (Malena-Chan 2019) or of processes of 'disruptive and transgressive learning' (Macintyre et al.

2019). From this perspective, recruiting other discursive entrepreneurs to pursue coordinated strategies is likely to be an effective tactic for success.

While the discursive landscape is certainly competitive, the review also points to integrative interactions. Authors write of stories: becoming 'entangled' with pre-existing local narratives (Scoville-Simonds 2018); playing a 'bridging' function between past, present and future (Augenstein and Palzkill 2016) or across discursive boundaries; acting as 'translation mechanisms' between an organisation and its environment (Augenstein and Palzkill 2016); 'intersecting' and 'negotiating' with each other (Pascoe et al. 2019b); and merging into integrated meta-narratives that combine the best features from each (Beling et al. 2018). This literature converges on a dialogic view of discursive change, where acts of discursive entrepreneurship engage with the existing discursive landscape and something new emerges, often place-specific, that is a collaboration between the entrepreneurial intent and the existing structure. Stories are interpreted through the lens of already prevalent frames, stories and narratives, and often creatively adapted and integrated into those existing storylines (Scoville-Simonds 2018; Pascoe et al. 2019b; van der Leeuw 2019). For example, Scoville-Simonds (2018) shows how climate change is interpreted differentially through the lenses of pre-existing religious beliefs in Andean Peru. Rather than interpreting climate change in Western scientific terms, local Catholics interpret the changing climate as an outcome of failing to perform traditional ceremonies of respect for the Earth, while Protestants see it as a sign of the approaching end of the world.

For discursive entrepreneurs, this dialogic view of discursive change means that predicting how a story will 'land' with an audience is challenging. They need to work closely and collaboratively with audiences (8 in Figure 3) to understand how new meanings might be integrated into the existing discursive landscape (van der Leeuw 2019) and whether they will align or clash with existing structures (Coulter et al. 2019). If discursive entrepreneurs can connect their desired meanings to existing narratives, they might be amplified in terms of reach and resonance. However, processes of integration are rarely equal, with incumbent and traditional place-based narratives tending to dominate; incumbents often have a degree of control over the transmission of stories due to discursive coalitions with media actors, as well as having many actors committed to retelling their stories (Shenhav 2015). Incumbent actors may also deflect new stories by making cosmetic changes to give an impression of change, without altering their core narrative commitments (Augenstein and Palzkill 2016; Narayanan and Adams 2017).

The power of a story to influence the discursive landscape is linked to its scale or reach (how many people are reproducing the story or using the memes it introduces), its resonance or persuasiveness (discussed in Sections 5.3 and 5.4) and how readily actors can connect their existing concerns to its storyline (Boas and Rothe 2016). On this latter point, some authors argue for construction of larger narratives, unifying concepts or meta-narratives that make it easier for diverse actors to see their place in a story (Bushell et al. 2015; Waddock 2016). These authors focus on larger transformative goals, not seeking to impose a single narrative (Pascoe et al. 2019b; van

der Leeuw 2019) but to find enough common ground across a multiplicity of narratives to act together in global discourse coalitions.

5.6 Collaborating with audiences

Consistent with this objective of finding common ground across multiple narratives, many authors deconstruct the notion of a one-way persuasive relationship between storyteller and listener, preferring instead to explore ways of working collaboratively with audiences (8 in Figure 3), as mentioned in Section 5.4. As noted above, this opens the way to a more ethical approach to discursive entrepreneurship. The literature identifies two ways discursive entrepreneurs can collaborate with audiences.

First, discursive entrepreneurs can use storytelling practices in small-group learning environments, such as classrooms, workshops and nature visits, to contribute to individual transformative learning (Audley and Stein 2017; Otto 2017; Fairfield 2018; O'Neil 2018; Macintyre et al. 2019). For example, storytelling can help individuals to experience other perspectives and realities, which can trigger the cognitive dissonance and reframing that is central to many theories of transformative learning (Audley and Stein 2017; Otto 2017; Macintyre et al. 2019). Humans constantly revise our personal narratives to reduce dissonance and make sense of chaotic events (Brown 2017; Malena-Chan 2019), but sometimes dissonance reaches the point where it triggers a larger shift in perspective. This type of learning is important because it expands individual meaning-making capacity (Hochachka 2019), opening up receptivity to the

type of complex, new global narratives that are needed to respond to sustainability challenges. One pathway to changing broad cultural narratives – perhaps the only one – is through these countless individual experiences of transformation.

Second, discursive entrepreneurs can empower publics to engage in their own meaning making, as opposed to external efforts to persuade an audience to act. In these participatory approaches, discursive entrepreneurs become facilitators to help groups of people to tell their own stories (Moezzi et al. 2017; Otto 2017). While such storytelling may trigger the kind of transformative learning outlined above, it can also help previously marginalised voices to enter the discourse. Further, storytelling can be used as a meaning-making practice that starts to lay down new personal narratives and identity (Brown 2017), for example through children sharing their stories about experiences with wilds and gardens (Audley and Stein 2017). When considering the normative question of how discursive entrepreneurs should pursue transformation of the discursive landscape, strategies that support people to engage in their own meaning-making seem ethically preferable to those that promote pre-selected meanings.

6 Conclusion

Transformations towards sustainability will inevitably involve discursive transformation. Discourses shape, and are shaped by, individual actions and social practices. If our practices change, as they must to meet the challenge of

transformation, then our discourses will also change. Discursive transformation might lead change in social practices, or it might follow, but it is clear that transformation of the discursive landscape is crucial to support flourishing, sustainable futures. The literature is cautious about the ability of discursive entrepreneurs to proactively pursue such transformation. While memes, stories, narratives and discourses are always changing, the structuration of the discursive landscape has a stabilising effect. New stories compete for attention with countless others, most of which reproduce already dominant discourses. If a story gets the attention of audiences, it is interpreted through the lens of existing discourses and often integrated into associated storylines rather than surviving in its original form. Stories that are too radical to fit existing discourses may 'bounce off' the existing structure entirely, while those that are too aligned lack transformative potential. As Audley and Stein (2017, p. 207) put it, discursive entrepreneurs 'will have to make particularly judicious use of language, as we are all products of past stories and will need considerable velocity to escape their orbits'.

Despite these challenges there is hope. This paper proposes a coherent language and conceptual framework to guide a practice of discursive entrepreneurship. Discursive entrepreneurs can engage in strategies of deconstruction, reframing, construction, performance, listening to feedback, and collaboration to increase the chances that their desired meanings will reach audiences, be heard by them and be retold. A common theme in the literature was the need for balance. Discursive entrepreneurs need to find memes and stories that blend familiarity with novelty, strategies that

balance persuasion with opening up spaces for audiences to do their own meaning-making, and calls for action that push an audience to act but do not push too hard.

Notably missing from the literature were reports on active experimentation with narrative transformation. Most of the reviewed literature inferred processes of narrative change after the fact, or analysed cases that the authors did not initiate. There is a need for action research that actively seeks to apply, evaluate and refine the strategies for discursive entrepreneurship summarised in Figures 2 and 3.

Also largely missing from the literature was any discussion of the ethics of discursive entrepreneurship. This goes to the heart of questions about the manner of transformation. Who has the right to pursue discursive transformation and what might be the impacts of such transformation on people that did not ask to have their core meanings deconstructed? The literature makes the power of stories and narratives clear but is largely silent on the potential for discursive entrepreneurs to use this power to manipulate audiences and impose their own preferences. From advertisers, to media actors, to politicians, there are many who already engage in such manipulation in support of the dominant discourse of neoliberal capitalism. Discursive entrepreneurship for sustainable futures needs to take a different approach – one where the strategies employed are consistent with a vision of justice, human wellbeing and diversity. While there will continue to be a role for persuasive communication, discursive entrepreneurs need to put much greater efforts into collaborating with

citizens, empowering them to tell their own stories and helping them to find their own meanings in a time of transformation.

Finally, while a significant proportion of the literature pointed to a role for bridging or unifying narratives that can help us to find common ground across diversity, the core memes from which that narrative could be built remain unclear. It is relatively easy to point to the core memes of currently dominant discourses, including economic growth, free markets, individualism, and dominance over nature. It is much harder to list agreed memes that will underpin a flourishing, sustainable human society. Collaboratively identifying those memes and working out how to connect them into globally compelling narratives that provide space for different social identities and purposes is a key research agenda.

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9 Tables

Table 1: Search terms used to identify relevant literature.

Search set	**Rationale**	**Search terms**
Discursive landscape	Scholars use diverse terms to describe aspects of the discursive landscape, as discussed further in Section 3. This search set was designed to capture the most prominent terms, identified from previous experience with the literature.	narrative* or story* or stories or meme or vision or meaning* or discourse* or discursive or metaphor
Change	The intention was to find articles specifically addressing change in the narrative world. Multiple synonyms were used, based on experience with the literature and results from test searches.	transform* or chang* or transition* or disrupt* or “systems change” or “system change” or diffusion or govern*
Sustainability	Articles were sought that were on topics specifically relating to sustainability, environmental issues and climate change.	sustainab* or environment* or climat* or "global warming"

10 Figure legends

Figure 1. Conceptual features of the discursive landscape.

Figure 2. The practice of discursive entrepreneurship as interplay of agency and structure.

Figure 3. Collaboration between discursive entrepreneur and audience.