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The flipside of hope discourse: avoiding accountability and assigning responsibility in sustainability transitions

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Nowadays, environmental scholars and practitioners largely embrace the importance of characterizing environmental communication via messages of hope. Overall, research on hope and communication suggests that strategically designed hope messages can foster pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. However, such research tends to focus solely on the instrumental aspects of communication. Conversely, research emphasizing the social function of hope considers it a discursive phenomenon that people actively use in interactions to perform different social actions. Accountability, responsibility, and agency are central features of hope discourse, and it is important that they are addressed in environmental communication and management to move from good intentions and high ambitions to action. In this paper, we examine how these issues are managed in inspirational meetings that promote the transition to a circular economy, one that is largely regarded as a promising strategy for solving contemporary environmental issues. We adopt the methodology of discursive psychology and analyze how the hope discourse that dominates these meetings is constructed, situated, and oriented toward action. We find that meeting participants use hope discourse to not only downplay problems and challenges but also avoid issues of accountability for claims that can be considered negative or pessimistic. Hope discourse can also be used to assign responsibility to others as well as to renounce it personally, thereby externalizing responsibility and construing hope as a passive act. Furthermore, hope discourse enables participants to portray themselves as active and agentic by claiming responsibility and making commitments to realize a circular economy, while bringing about change. However, such commitments tend to be non-specific, and participants rarely clarify the extent of their responsibility or the actions they encompass. We conclude that hope discourse relates to accountability, responsibility, and agency in ambiguous and variable ways; therefore, environmental scholars and practitioners should critically engage with such a discourse by identifying when it enables the joint exploration of problems and challenges and when it closes down.

KEYWORDS

hope, discourse, accountability, responsibility, agency, discursive psychology, environmental communication, circular economy

1 Introduction

A fundamental and important question in environmental communication research concerns the different norms of interaction and qualities of communication needed to coordinate society's transition of production and consumption systems for sustainability. This transition is both difficult and paradoxical, and it demands interorganizational collaboration.

This is difficult because it demands that citizens and organizations be motivated to act for change and be well informed about their options (Terzi, 2020). This is paradoxical because of conflicts of interest and system resistance based on the benefits of maintaining the status quo of production and consumption systems (Ciplet and Harrison, 2020; Kalt, 2022; Kroh and Schultz, 2023; Scholl and Coolen, 2023). Hence, there are expectations of functional communication processes dealing with information, motivation, and action, as well as of communication processes entailing paradoxes due to conflict and resistance. Central to the management of these communication processes in relation to society's transformation is how participants approach and have the intersubjective capacity to address accountability, responsibility, and agency.

A widely debated issue in environmental communication research has been whether the invocation of hope or fear in communication is more effective in promoting pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Morris et al., 2020; Ettinger et al., 2021). Adopting a discourse of hope has become the norm when addressing environmental and sustainability issues, and it has replaced the "gloom and doom" discourse that has long characterized the environmental movement (Chandler, 2019; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019). There is a widespread call to focus on hope in environmental communication research (Stern, 2012; Moser, 2016; Cassegård and Thörn, 2018) and practice (Head, 2016; de Vries, 2020), and much research suggests that hope and other related positive emotions are an antecedent for pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Schneider et al., 2021). Furthermore, well-tailored hope messages can motivate and encourage individuals to engage in environmental issues, whereas messages of fear risk discouragement and rather promote disengagement (Feldman and Hart, 2018; Marlon et al., 2019; Bury et al., 2020). Therefore, arguably, successful environmental communication that fosters environmental engagement should employ specifically designed messages that evoke hope rather than fear in the target audience (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Merkel et al., 2020; Ettinger et al., 2021). However, little is known about the social implications of the norm in expressing hope and how it shapes environmental communication practices in situations where it is enacted and beyond (Åhlvik et al., 2023). As a complement to studying the emotions or the expression of emotions, we take a social constructionist perspective and pay attention to how the hope norm shapes discourse. We refer to this as hope discourse, which we define as a preference in the interactional procedure itself for hopeful expressions in language and interaction. These hopeful expressions include utterances where the object of hope generally is future improvement (Wettergren, 2025). They acknowledge that something that has happened is positive or that things are not as negative as they might seem, as well as expressions of optimism that something positive will happen and that there is potential for positive outcomes. Importantly, the interactional procedure establishes that the expression is acknowledged as a positive outlook by the other participants in the interaction. This means that hope discourse is accomplished in the interaction of participants who are not acting on the basis of personal choices or taste but comply with this norm for how the interaction is preferably organized.

Of particular interest are the implications of the procedures of hope discourse on how people manage accountability, responsibility, and agency issues. This concerns fundamental challenges within the field, namely, how communicative procedures concerning change

processes for sustainability are initiated, negotiated, and maintained in interaction. Research has demonstrated not only that the discourse of hope tends to revolve around issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency but also that the ways in which they are managed interactionally have practical implications (Elliott and Olver, 2007; Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015; Kirby et al., 2021). The way through which these issues are identified and investigated by collaborating with actors in different sustainability initiatives matters. For example, a hope discourse that obscures these issues by placing one's hope on technological innovations toward developing solutions to climate change, thereby reducing one's own responsibility and agency to act, may foster false hope, which in turn leads to inaction (Ojala, 2012, 2015; Moser, 2015; Marlon et al., 2019).

To understand the relationship between hope and issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency in large-scale social change processes such as sustainability transition, hope and communication are approached as social and discursive phenomena in this study. Accordingly, we claim that understanding how these issues are negotiated by participants through their social interactions is imperative, as this is where understandings are created, established, and made consequential for future action.

In this paper, we examine the relationship between hope discourse and accountability, responsibility, and agency, as it is constructed and managed in inspirational meetings on the topic of the circular economy, which is promoted as a promising solution to contemporary sustainability challenges (Corvellec et al., 2020). The circular economy generally refers to "an economy that is restorative and regenerative by design" (Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF), 2015, p. 5), and it has been widely promoted as key in addressing issues of sustainability, as it radically reduces resource use and waste (Kerdlap et al., 2019). Moreover, the circular economy has been said to solve the conflict between continued economic growth and limiting environmental degradation and climate change, which makes it a highly optimistic concept (Persson, 2015; Korhonen et al., 2018). In the Swedish circular economy community, it is common practice to organize inspirational and business-oriented meetings to promote the circular economy (Rödl et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that these meetings are dominated by a hope norm that hinders the joint exploration of ambiguities, conflicts, and challenges regarding the implementation of a circular economy (Åhlvik et al., 2023). However, such explorations are crucial for successful environmental communication (Hallgren, 2016). Moreover, in these meetings, what actions should be taken and by whom are never elucidated (Åhlvik et al., 2023), a finding that this study aims to further unpack, because of its relevance for the realization of sustainability transitions. The current paper therefore focuses on exploring how issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency are managed in the social interaction of such meetings.

How people manage these issues in interactions is a traditional analytical theme in the field of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Research in this field acknowledges that speakers deal with accountability, responsibility, and agency when they report on events and are mutually held accountable for what they say and for its interactional consequences (Wiggins, 2017). Discursive psychology further recognized that people in interaction continuously attend to events in terms of what is considered normal, expected, and proper, and in doing so, they address their accountability and responsibility (Edwards, 1997). Building on this, accountability is used in our study for situations where the speaker refers back to what someone has said

or done, whereas responsibility has a forward-looking aspect, pointing to potential future actions. Moreover, when dealing with accountability and responsibility, speakers manage their agency. Speakers can, for example, make excuses for their actions, blame or justify others, and effectively downplay their agency (Buttny, 1993; Locke, 2004). Through discourse, particular actions are accomplished, and the discourse sets the frames for future actions.

By adopting the methodology of discursive psychology, we examine how the management of accountability, responsibility, and agency in hope discourse sets the discursive scene for change processes for sustainability. To do this, we treat hope as constructed in and constructive of the social world and as being used to perform different social actions. Accordingly, we explore discourse as a social action specifically designed for its interactional context (Burr, 2015). Hence, we depart from the dominant focus on hope as a cognitive-behavioral phenomenon with a positive effect on individual pro-environmental behavior to viewing hope as a social accomplishment.

We now provide a brief review of the literature on the circular economy, hope communication, and research on the social functions of hope discourse. This is followed by a description of the materials and the analytical procedure. Thereafter, we present our analysis of hope discourse in meetings and discuss the broader implications of our findings to understand hope discourse more generally and for circular economy transition.

2 Background

2.1 High hopes for a circular economy

Over the past decade, the circular economy model has become increasingly popular for addressing complex issues of sustainability (Corvellec et al., 2020). The model is argued to bridge the longstanding conflict between economic growth and the environment and is maintained to be a promising approach to sustainable development (Korhonen et al., 2018). In a circular economy, the linear models of production and consumption are replaced by a circular model, implemented through, inter alia, the recycling, reuse, repair, and repurposing of products (Ghisellini et al., 2016).

The circular economy has become an established economic strategy in the EU (European Commission, 2020), and countries such as Sweden have adopted a national strategy for its implementation (Regeringskansliet, Sweden, 2021). One of the many sectors in which the concept has been adopted broadly is the Swedish agrifood sector, where the inherent flows of bio-material in the production of food and fiber add to the general circular economy principles of the recycling of materials. Here, meetings that serve to promote a circular economy are common practice (Rödl et al., 2022). Previous research has demonstrated that these meetings are dominated by a hope norm, which means that optimistic expressions of the potential of a circular economy are emphasized, whereas deviations from this potential are accompanied by excuses and reprimanded in the interactions. Consequently, a sense of community in favor of a circular economy and solidarity is created among meeting participants, while problems and disagreements are avoided (Rödl et al., 2022; Åhlvik et al., 2023).

The tendency to focus on the positive side of things, avoid disagreement, and emphasize the strength of a collective that comes together to realize a circular economy is reflected in the broader

circular economy discourse, which centers on the creation of win-win situations, possibility of large-scale collaboration across sectors, and importance of building consensus among collaborators (Kovacic et al., 2019). However, previous research suggests that the hopeful circular economy discourse promotes vagueness, and consequently, what actions to take and by whom to realize a circular economy are never discussed. Instead, the discourse overall focuses on the great chances of realizing a circular economy by coming together and collaborating; that a circular economy actually brings real change in sustainability; and that there is always some progress to be found in disasters and setbacks (Åhlvik et al., 2023). This paper aims to further the ambition to investigate the consequences of such a vagueness in relation to issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency. These issues are important, considering that the implementation of a circular economy requires that a wide range of actors, often crossing over diverse sectors, align their potentially conflicting economic interests and objectives to establish the intricate collaboration that is required to create circular flows of production (Kovacic et al., 2019). Thus, the transition to a circular economy places great demands on action, coordination, and the division of responsibilities.

2.2 Hope communication research

Extensive research has been conducted to investigate whether and to what extent messages of hope foster pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. Traditionally, fear appeals have been used in climate change communication, which has attracted attention, but have been overwhelming for people and inefficient for public engagement (Hornsey and Fielding, 2016; Kaltenbacher and Drews, 2020; McKasy et al., 2023). Studies on persuasive messaging often argue for negative framing concerning health issues, but concerning environmental issues, positive framing and hope motivate people (Diamond and Urbanski, 2022). Based on a case concerning water pollution, Hmielowski et al. (2019) argue for communication to be less “doom and gloom” in order not to result in inaction. Accordingly, research has, for example, examined hope as an explanatory factor for the increasing environmental engagement among students in environmental education (Ojala, 2012, 2015; Li and Monroe, 2019; Bury et al., 2020). Hope appeals have been argued to increase individual motivation to engage in activism against climate change and are therefore considered an important tool in climate change communication (Chadwick, 2015; van Zomeren et al., 2019).

However, several recent studies have challenged the effect of hope messages on pro-environmental behavioral intentions (Hornsey and Fielding, 2016; Ettinger et al., 2021; Lu, 2023). Based on a longitudinal experiment, Diamond and Urbanski (2022) argued that the positive framing of news reporting about climate change resulted in emotions of hope but had no influence on action. This study is among other recent ones that challenge the dominant view that hopeful framing is most efficient in environmental communication.

Irrespective of the correlation between hope and pro-environmental behavior, research in the field is primarily based on reception experiments and surveys and is dominated by a focus on the message and its content (e.g., McKasy et al., 2023; DiRusso and Myrick, 2021), framing and delivery by a communicator, and cognitive and emotional effects on the individual receiver. Hope becomes conceptualized as an intrasubjective phenomenon and evaluated for its effectiveness in

motivating individuals to change their attitudes and behaviors. This builds on a view of hope as a cognitive-behavioral phenomenon (Elliott and Olver, 2002; Webb, 2012), overlooking its social nature (Crapanzano, 2003) and its interactional function (cf. Wiggins et al., 2001). The development of such an intersubjective understanding of hope is crucial when investigating its role in communication processes that address complex issues of sustainability, which are large-scale processes that necessitate open and constructive expressions of different perspectives and imagined solutions (Rödl et al., 2022). By analyzing hope as a discursive accomplishment (Åhlvik et al., 2023) and communication as a co-constructed social and symbolic action (Craig, 1999), we elucidate the negotiations on how hope discourse is co-constructed in interactions vis-à-vis action. This paper investigates the processes of how negotiations between the issue, potential hope, and action transpire in interaction, an assessment that has been scarcely done in environmental communication research. We focus on how accountability, responsibility, and action play out in relation to the societal call for hope discourse (Head, 2016; Chandler, 2019; Ettinger et al., 2021) as in the strategy for implementing a transition to a circular economy and to a sustainable society overall. In doing this, we build on research that not only explores the social function of hope and emphasizes the situatedness of hope discourse but also reveals that people in interaction actively (albeit unconsciously) use discourse to accomplish different social actions (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1999; Elliott and Olver, 2007).

2.3 The social functions of hope discourse

Environmental communication can be considered as a process whereby meaning is created through interaction (Blumer, 1998/1969; Cox, 2013). Similarly, hope as a discourse is developed through interaction, but this has rarely been the focus of environmental communication research thus far. However, the way that hope features in social interaction has been widely studied in a context that is seemingly very different from circular economy meetings and issues of sustainability, namely, the context of healthcare (Herrestad et al., 2014; Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015), which our study draws on. Here, a more pragmatic approach to research is adopted and hope is understood as being constructed and managed in social practices (Herrestad et al., 2014).

Aiming to examine the discursive properties of hope, Elliott and Olver (2007) emphasize the importance of viewing hope as an interpersonal practice and studying the social functions of hope discourse. They explore how hope features in cancer patients' talk and what the implications are for clinical practice. By interviewing patients about the prospects of their treatment being unsuccessful, they find that hope features as a possession of the patient (e.g., "I hope that...") and is used by patients in a manner that portrays them as active participants in their treatment. However, hope is also portrayed as something objectively verifiable, attributed to circumstances, and used by patients to position themselves as passive and dependent on the circumstances being conveyed by the medical practitioner. This, in turn, highlights issues of responsibility: whether there is hope for recovery is simply conveyed by the practitioner in a way that minimizes their responsibility thereof. Thus, to hope for something construes outcomes as a matter of uncertainty and enables the speaker to avoid responsibility for the outcome. Moreover, it enables the speaker to show "support for an outcome without claiming

responsibility for it" (Elliott and Olver, 2007, p. 145). Conversely, hope also features as an "I hope you..." construct, working to assign responsibility to others. Again, by placing hope onto another, patients position themselves as being passive and dependent on the medical practitioner but morally oblige the practitioner to fulfill a certain wish, effectively placing responsibility on them.

It is evident from the studies presented above that hope discourse has varied social functions in relation to accountability, responsibility, and ascribing agency to someone. We build on this research while also acknowledging that hope discourse may have additional and potentially even more intricate functions in circular economy meetings, considering that sustainability transitions typically involve more actors and, to a lesser extent, are limited to individual behavior and outcomes; in addition, they have a different, often longer, time scale. Nevertheless, issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency are crucial to address in the sustainability transition, and this paper aims to explore how these issues are managed in social interactions that are characterized by hope discourse.

3 Methodology

3.1 Empirical material

The empirical material consists of video-recorded online meetings on the circular economy topic in the Swedish food sector. The meetings are referred to as seminars, panel discussions, and workshops, and they typically focus on the great potential of transitioning to a circular food sector. Invitations to the meetings generally emphasize that participants will learn about the circular economy, be provided "good examples" of circular practices, and "get inspired." A common outline of the meeting is to provide a presentation of some kind and to have a moderated discussion with invited guests, followed by a session in which participants can discuss what has been presented or their views on the topic. Organizers encourage participants to share their knowledge and jointly explore what the circular economy entails and how to realize it. We label the meetings "inspirational meetings" to distinguish them from more formal meetings that typically have a detailed agenda and more specific goals and are dedicated to making decisions, solving problems, negotiating agreements, developing policies, and so on (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). The organizers are private organizations that either have a financial or ideological interest in sustainability in general or in corporate sustainability more specifically. The meetings were identified through mailing lists, personal contacts, Internet searches, and membership in two Swedish circular economy advocacy organizations. Most meetings were free of charge and open for anyone to attend. However, they primarily targeted entrepreneurs, businesspeople, and policymakers within the agri-food sector.

All meetings were held online in 2020, with the exception of one in-person event held in March 2019, which was recorded and made available online by the organizers. In total, 18 meetings make up the corpus of this study and cover 35.5 h of video recordings, each of them being 1–2 h long, with around 20 participants. Sequences in the form of lectures were attended to and discussed but excluded from the data corpus. This resulted in 5.5 h of 7 meetings being transcribed and subjected to further analysis. To protect the privacy of participants, we have pseudonymized their names with letters that follow the alphabet, in order of appearance (skipping the letter "I"). Ethical

approval is not required for publicly available video materials, according to Swedish legislation.

3.2 Analytical process

This study engages with foundational issues in the field of environmental communication, namely, how overarching trends and norms in communicative procedures are initiated, negotiated, and maintained in environmental communication practices, and what the social implications of such procedures entail (e.g., Hallgren et al., 2018). The analytical process of this paper follows the methodology of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wiggins, 2017), and we examine how participants actively (albeit unconsciously) use discourse to construct different versions of reality, in addition to the social implications of such constructs (Burr, 2015). We analyze how hope discourse is constructed, while carefully considering that it is situated in a specific social and interactional context in which it is used to perform different social actions such as agreeing, assessing, justifying, encouraging, accepting offers, making commitments, and avoiding responsibility (Wiggins, 2017). Accordingly, we consider participants' talk as "social action designed for its local interactional context," rather than the outcome of cognitive processes (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2000, p. 798). Thus, the discourse constructed in inspirational circular economy meetings not only serves a social function in the meetings but also has social implications beyond them in time and space, which the examination of discourse in interaction enables us to explore.

The initial coding was performed in collaboration with research colleagues, and out of the 5.5 h of transcribed material, we coded roughly 150 sequences that, in some way, relate to hope, including borderline cases and where hope is countered by pessimistic talk regarding the potential of a circular economy. We used the broad definition of hope as expressions of optimism that focus on positive future outcomes as a guide for our coding process, which covers both explicit and implicit hope constructions. The criteria for including different sequences in the "hope code" were continuously discussed in data sessions and adjusted accordingly. We performed a second coding by identifying patterns in the 150 sequences, including the discursive construction of win-win situations, the creation of success stories, claims that the circular economy brings real change, how small actions lead to great changes, and the construction of a powerful circular economy collective. These patterns informed a third round of coding in which we identified patterns regarding how such hope discourses were constructed and managed in social interaction, which underpins our definition of hope discourse above. We performed a more detailed analysis, zooming in on the interaction, and transcribed the material according to the transcription system developed by Jefferson (2004), marking emphasis with underlined text and pauses with (.), while overlapping talk was indicated by placing the turns under each other, marked with square brackets. We took 47 relatively long excerpts through this procedure, and then, guided by our research question, we selected 22 excerpts in which issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency were more prominent. We analyzed these excerpts to understand how these issues were constructed and managed in hope discourse. To do this, we identified discursive devices such as hedging, minimizing, and contrasting talk (see Wiggins, 2017, table 6.1 for a comprehensive list), which, according to the methodology of discursive psychology, perform different social actions concerning the

management of accountability, responsibility, and agency, as we investigate in the analysis. In order to facilitate reading and respecting space limitations, we selected eight excerpts for this paper. The selection was based on where the issues in focus of our analysis played out in the format of condensed interaction. How to reflect the data in general and present a variation of expressions were also given consideration in our selection process. The hope discourse characterized the empirical material and guided our initial coding but features less prominently in some of the eight short excerpts selected. The excerpts were later translated from Swedish into English for publication, aiming to strike a balance between reproducing the original wording and non-linguistic cues, and the pragmatic meaning conveyed.

4 Analysis

As mentioned previously, research has demonstrated that a hope norm is reproduced in circular economy meetings (Rödl et al., 2022). In what follows, we examine the discursive practices and social actions related to this norm. More specifically, we examine how the social actions of claiming or avoiding accountability, responsibility, and agency are managed in hope discourse. This analytical focus was chosen to explore how discourse in the meetings shapes the possibilities of going from ambitions and intentions to action and implementation, which has yet to be studied despite its potentially crucial importance for environmental communication practice. Next, we present our discursive psychological analysis of eight selected excerpts from circular economy meetings, the empirical material upon which this study builds.

4.1 Excerpt 1: undeniably exciting to follow

Hope discourse is constructed in the meetings by describing a circular economy project or event as "exciting," which, considering that the aim of the meetings is to promote a circular economy, implies a positive outcome. In the excerpt below, taken from a panel discussion on the potential of circular food production in Sweden, the invited Speaker A presents a circular project that produces insect-fed fish. After having described the project, she claims that it has provided a solution to the crucial problem of making sustainable food products as tasty as "regular" ones. Speaker A describes a successful circular economy project that she hopes they will be able to up-scale.

- A: [...] we had a very good taste evaluation there was more wild fish taste and better texture in the insect fed fish and that's a very important aspect [...] if it's going to end up in a product then it has to be tasty [...] so that's one example of a circular project that we work with (.) and we hope that we'll be able to up-scale together with a number of waste companies in Swedish municipalities
- B: that's undeniably going to be exciting to follow (.) and next time when we talk regenerative agriculture I know that you'll join with more exciting projects
- A: yes
- B: thank you [name] thank you [...]

Participant A uses the verb "hope" in a way that manages accountability; it marks the up-scaling of the project as tentative or provisional. This implies a level of uncertainty: there is a possibility that the upscaling might fail, and by invoking hope, A can retract the

claim in the event of such a failure. Used in this way, we suggest that the verb “hope” is part of the discursive practice of hedging. Moderator B responds by describing the project as “undeniably exciting to follow,” which reinforces and invokes optimistic expectations and implies that the project will succeed. Furthermore, it constructs a “doer” (the project, which Speaker A is part of) and an undefined “follower,” who is portrayed as passive and not responsible for the progress of the project. This can also be viewed as the moderator speaking on behalf of the general audience, expressing support for the project, where those following it are rooting for its success. In that way, hope discourse serves the function of expressing support and making a weak commitment to something (in this case, a circular economy project) without taking action or even assuming responsibility for its progression. Thus, someone else is supposed to act but is not even held fully responsible for it. Speaker B emphasizes that A will return with more examples of “exciting projects,” providing even more hope for the circular economy community. In conclusion, this excerpt demonstrates that hope discourse can be used to hedge talk, that is, to make something tentative or provisional, and to show support without claiming responsibility for taking action.

4.2 Excerpt 2: a little last

One way in which participants construct hope discourse is by downplaying the seriousness of negative talk or “troubles talk” (Jefferson, 1988), orientating to a social expectation of ending negative talk on a positive note (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2000). This is demonstrated in the excerpt below, taken from the same panel discussion on the potential of circular food production in Sweden. Panel Participant C discusses the obstacles to realizing a circular economy and then turns to the progress that is being made.

- C: [...] the greatest eh changes now (.) takes place at an eu level if you look at europe that is [...] so we'll have to see (.) we'll have to hope more for eu I think than maybe the delegation since we're last among the nordic countries eh when it comes to eh seize a circular economy (.) ehm so (.) we're a little last [...]

Speaker C claims that the greatest progress in promoting the circular economy is made at the EU level, which is why we should put our hopes on the EU rather than on the Swedish authorities. She hedges this claim by adding “I think,” thereby marking it as a sensitive or contested issue (Goodman and Burke, 2011; Wiggins, 2017). This softens the potentially negative impact of C's claim that Sweden is the last to realize a circular economy and enables her to reframe it as a matter of opinion and not necessarily a fact. Thus, C manages accountability for the claim by framing it as uncertain, making it possible to soften it or take it back if a disagreement arises. In addition, the “we” that C encourages to hope for more for EU, is constructed as passively reactive in relation to the EU level, which is not active but the level where changes “take place.” Thereby, to hope is constructed as a passive act that places the responsibility for implementation on the abstract level upon which the hope is placed.

Notably, Speaker C further asserts that Sweden (the “we” she refers to) is last among the Nordic countries to “seize” the circular economy. However, she minimizes this claim by reformulating it to Sweden being “a little last,” effectively downplaying the significance of her claim (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012). It is unclear what position one

takes when being “a little last,” and this claim may be interpreted simply as an attempt to sound more positive. The minimization device also deflects C's accountability for her claim and rhetorically works against the potential counter-claim that Sweden is actually not last and, similarly to the hedge “I think,” makes it possible for her to withdraw the claim in the event of disagreement (Goodman and Burke, 2011).

This excerpt demonstrates an overall expectancy in the meetings to either deliver “good news” regarding the progress of the circular economy or, at least, to end negative talk on a positive note. Making claims that counter this expectancy requires one to renounce accountability for that claim. This raises important issues regarding responsibility and agency: to hope places expectations on someone else and does not require the hoper to do anything herself (Elliott and Olver, 2007).

4.3 Excerpt 3: time is ticking

Similar to the downplaying of troubles talk, hope discourse is produced by participants in contrasting statements that deflect from something negative. In the excerpt below, Speaker C shifts from sharing her observations of the current negative state of the circular economy to introducing moral aspects of the need to act. The hopeful element here is the prospect of positive outcomes, provided that people address the current situation and start acting.

- C: [...] we've reached the end of the road (.) it doesn't work anymore we won't be able to feed nine billion on earth and it's [that]
- B: [twenty fifty]
- C: yes twenty fifty and it's that (.) yeah exactly it's that reality we live with today so we simply must do something and that's why we sit here today because the realizations are starting to catch up
- B: (.) time is eh ticking (.) according to C [...]

Speaker C claims to talk about “the state of reality” and does so in a resolute manner, marked by intonal emphasis and by breaking with the overall discursive practice in the meeting of hedging and minimizing talk. She attributes responsibility to an unspecified “we” who are left with no choice than to do something since “the end of the road” has been reached. She constructs an agent who has to face the consequences of their actions. However, it is unclear what “we” should do, only that we have to do something. Thus, C constructs a strong but indirect discourse of responsibility, not clarifying who should be held accountable (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005). Using such vague discourse enables C to make a strong statement, portraying herself as committed to the issue of the circular economy and global food supply without necessarily being held accountable for securing it (Lester and Paulus, 2011). Through value-laden discourse, she also encourages others to commit and even attributes them to the responsibility of realizing a future in which we can feed nine billion people.

Moderator B takes a deep breath and pauses briefly, indicating interactional trouble of some kind (Jefferson, 1988), before responding with the formulation of the gist “time is ticking.” While this figurative expression reproduces C's invocations of time, urgency, and drama, it downplays the seriousness of her account. The claim that we are running out of time has a long history in environmental discourse and has become a somewhat worn out expression (Woroniecki et al., 2022). Thus, B summarizes C's troubles talk in a cliché phrase, a discursive

strategy that deflects from difficult conversations (Drew and Holt, 1998). Notably, B says this formulation in English instead of Swedish (the language in which the meeting is held), which works to create a distance to it and further enforces the cliché. Moreover, B mitigates accountability by adding that this is C's opinion and uses the formulation to close the discussion and swiftly transition to the next question.

This excerpt demonstrates that when moral aspects that create a sense of responsibility and urgency are introduced an utterance can be treated as troubles talk, i.e., it is not considered hopeful enough. This creates an interactional situation, which, in order for the hope norm to be maintained, requires downplaying the gravity and, consequently, upholding the hope discourse characterizing the overall interaction in the meeting distracts from further investigations of responsibility.

4.4 Excerpt 4: child's faith

When troubles talk is produced, meeting participants tend to end on a positive note, thereby orienting toward a hope norm (Rödl et al., 2022). The excerpt below is from the same panel discussion as the previous excerpts and is preceded by a discussion about the obstacles to a circular transition. Panelist C initiates a shift from talk about obstacles to conversations about the great potential of a circular economy. She attributes the potential success of the circular economy to its incorporation of the economic realm: It is beneficial for businesses, which is key in the transition to a circular and sustainable society. Without this incorporation, the progress of this transition will be limited. Businesses are portrayed as actors with agency; businesses are responsible for advancing the circular economy.

- C: [...] and it's that (.) that can be the key mm (.) in making this a reality otherwise we'll not eh reach much further than we have today and then we'll have to see what happens but we (.) what was it that you said? we're eh
- D: (unclear)
- C: you had an expression eh a little have child's faith you said (.) is that what's needed maybe? [...]

Participant C portrays the future as uncertain and as one that we have limited control over. She argues that if a circular economy is not realized, we will have to wait and see what happens, which implies a passive and agentless actor. The alternative to an unknown future is rhetorically portrayed as less appealing than the realization of a circular economy. Setting up such a discursive contrast strengthens her argument about the great potential of the circular economy. However, she does not end with this dire statement but returns to a previous claim made by Panel Participant D, who stated that even though there are great obstacles in realizing a circular economy, he has a "child's faith" in it. Notably, C reuses this statement by rhetorically asking, imbedded with hedges like "a little" and "maybe," whether it is child's faith that is needed, thereby decreasing the speaker's accountability for this claim. This invokes a passive and naïve agent who does not doubt, question, or seek explanations; they just believe. Believing does not require action and works discursively in ways similar to hoping. Moreover, it sets up an either/or state of affairs and simplifies things, making it appear as if there are only these two choices (a circular economy or an uncertain future) and that the choice is simple. Ending on this more "upbeat" note downplays the seriousness in C's threat of an uncertain reality, as uncertainty can

be managed through faith. This softens her dire statement. It is, however, possible that C is making a point of the absurdity of child's faith and of not taking responsibility by resorting to faith when promoting a circular economy as the obviously better alternative.

So far in the analysis, we have demonstrated that participants tend to end troubles talk on a positive note and that they orientate toward issues of action and agency in different ways: by placing expectations upon someone else, expressed by the passive act of hoping, or that this agentic person is not defined and neither the needed actions nor even such non-designated claims are followed by a positive smoothing note. In this excerpt, hope discourse actually portrays not acting as the preferred alternative.

4.5 Excerpt 5: hands-on advice

The excerpt below is from a different panel discussion where participants discuss how to realize a circular economy. Panel Participant E is asked to comment on whether increasing indoor cultivation will enable the food sector to meet increasing food demands.

- E: [...] it's great that we can produce more I just (.) don't think maybe that it's that which will currently kind of save us or whatever we should say from some kind of dramatic perspective
- F: a thousand thanks e[h
- G: [comment (.) one more thing about urban cultivation [...] there's also a movement toward doing cultivation yourself (.) in the city cultivating in the forest and eh we have a tradition of this colony garden eh production and eh in many parts of the world you support your family by having some backyard cultivation and then you go to work (.) we can also increase that I think we shouldn't forget that (.) [so there's a lot of fun to do
- E: [no of course not
- G: there actually also
- F: good a very good hands-on advice [...]

Speaker E argues that while increasing food production might be great, it might not be our salvation. This dramatic perspective constructs reality as a matter of "us" being in the passive position of needing to be saved, which is neither a desirable nor empowering position to be in. E evades the assignment of anyone to act, showing that her claim may be heard as problematic by hedging her talk ("kind of," "whatever we should say"), and in several ways marks it as provisional ("I just don't think maybe") and tentative ("currently"), thereby highlighting that this is a delicate issue (Wiggins, 2017). By making her claim unspecific and provisional, E avoids accountability for her claim and allows her claim to be downplayed or taken back if a disagreement arises (Wiggins, 2017). Moreover, E's hedging utterance possibly points to the interactional challenge panel participants deal with in the meetings overall, that is, of being expected to present "good news," even when there is none.

Speaker G interrupts Moderator F and takes the turn to "comment," which is a noteworthy act considering that F manages turn-taking and that there is a strong interactional norm to speak one at a time (Sacks et al., 1974). Notably, G encourages participants not to forget that there is a lot of "fun" that individuals can experience regarding food production. Thereby, she shifts the discourse from the issues of salvation and drama to those of fun and possibilities. In contrast to E, the "we" that G invokes is portrayed as agentic: There

are fun and easily accessible things that individuals can do today. Moreover, it is what people already do “in many parts of the world,” a corroboration that makes her account seem more factual and independent of her opinion. Backyard cultivation is constructed as a scripted event (Edwards, 1994) that someone simply does before work, and as minimal (“some”), which further adds to portraying backyard cultivation as easily accessible. This, in turn, indirectly serves to attribute responsibility: As it is so easily accessible and something that people in other parts of the world already do, there is really no excuse to not grow your own food.

Interestingly, F supports and upgrades G’s comment as “very good hands-on advice” and encourages participants to grow at least one plant (data not presented in the excerpt). In sum, this excerpt demonstrates, first, how a claim that challenges the hope norm is hedged and accountability avoided in several ways, and then, by contrast, how hope discourse can accommodate participants to encourage people to utilize their agency and attribute them the responsibility to do so.

4.6 Excerpt 6: triple-win

As touched upon in the previous excerpts, the attribution of accountability is at stake in hope discourse. In the excerpt below, Moderator B describes circular food production as a “triple-win” and poses a question that addresses accountability for action.

- B: [...] about the circular (.) food production it seems to be such a triple-win which is (.) we can produce more food with less resources (.) because we use those that we don’t use kind of and that’s great benefits for the environment (.) so and we can make money on things we don’t make money on today because it’s thrown away (.) why haven’t we always done this? (.)
- B: so why (.) has it not been implemented (.) to a larger extent? (.)
- B: it can be a stupid question, but I figure it’s worth asking it seems so
- C: should you start? ((turning toward H))
- B: so real (.) good this (.)
- H: yeah but i[t
- B: [why doesn’t everyone?
- H: there are two factors (.) it’s money (.) and it’s old eh photosynthesis if you put it that way in other words coal oil [...]

A “triple-win” is an upgrade of the “win-win situation” idiom and places a strong emphasis on the potential of a circular economy in addressing the challenges faced by the food sector today. Moderator B lists this potential in three parts, strengthening her claim of a triple-win situation by making it seem more factual and independent of her opinions (Jefferson, 1990). She concludes the list by asking the panel why we have not always had circular food production, which portrays a circular economy as the obvious choice. Moreover, the question has moral connotations and marks a shift to a moral discourse where panelists are indirectly held responsible (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005) to account for why the circular economy has not been realized. Subsequently, B demonstrates that she understands that this question may be considered problematic by performing several turn expansions.

Invoking the potential of stupidity serves as a disclaimer for posing a question that is not in line with the objective of the panel discussion, showing that her identity and professionalism as a moderator could be questioned (cf. Condor et al., 2006). The expansions downgrade the question and make it appear less controversial, confrontative, or problematic, while also reducing the extent to which B can be held accountable for it. It is also possible that B’s turn expansions serve to fill the long silence that follows her question, a silence which might be due to confusion regarding who in the panel was actually given the turn to answer. However, the fact that B interrupts H when he starts providing an answer indicates that this is not the primary reason.

Although it may seem that B speaks very optimistically about the potential of a circular economy, the turn expansions she produces indicate that a different interpretation may be more plausible: The triple-win construct and the expansions that follow it may serve as a provocative overstatement that actually invites criticism of the circular economy. Moreover, B may open up a critical discussion of the circular economy by implying that if the circular economy is actually as great as it seems, we would have realized it by now, and hence, the critique for inaction would not be placed on participants but on the idea of a circular economy. Panelist H, who finally answers B’s question, orientates toward this question as a simple one with two explanatory factors, namely, money and fossil fuels, neither of which is moral or philosophical in the way he expands on this in the succeeding talk (data not shown). However, neither does he second the implied negative critique of the idea of a circular economy but rather provides a neutral response. In this excerpt, there are several ways in which accountability operates. Accountability for action or inaction is a central feature in hope discourse and is treated as a delicate issue. The moral issue of accounting for what someone should have done is interactionally difficult in this social context, and in this example, it is not made easier by the fact that by B’s way of circumventing the accountability for her provocative statement; it is unclear whether B actually challenges the circular economy and who is supposed to be held accountable for responding to the question.

4.7 Excerpt 7: energy forward

For hope to be constructive and foster change, issues of agency, coupled with those of accountability, need to be addressed (Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015; Marlon et al., 2019). Although the construction of an agentic and responsible actor can sometimes be considered problematic (see Excerpt 6), there are cases in which the opposite is true, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from a panel debate on the topics of innovation and circular economy, providing “inspiring examples” of circular economy projects. Moderator H closes the debate by emphasizing the importance of real collaboration where actors involved “help each other for real” (Åhlvik et al., 2023), whereafter H gives the word to the second moderator J.

- H: [...] thank you everyone (.) for having (.) joined (.) and thank you for a good panel discussion and with that I leave the word (.) to (.) J
- J: big thanks this has been an absolutely wonderful morning [...] ehm otherwise (.) I just wanna thank you and wish you a nice weekend (.) it feels like I at least got plenty of energy going forward (.) thank you so much [...]

Moderator J expresses appreciation for the meeting, describing it as “absolutely wonderful” and portraying it as rewarding. She concludes by explaining that she feels rejuvenated by participating in it while, through hedging, emphasizing that this is her subjective experience, which the other participants may not align with. In this way, J manages accountability for her claim and refutes the potential counter-claim that the meeting is not wonderful and energizing, demonstrating an orientation toward a culture of virtual meeting fatigue that drains participants of energy (Toney et al., 2021). This meeting is acknowledged to be different in that it generates energy. Moreover, the emotional state of having “energy going forward” implies a positive progression and establishes J’s stake in the progress of the circular economy. By having participated in the meeting, she will be able to do more, portraying herself as agentic and able to influence the course of events. She also expresses commitment and implies that she will use her gained energy to act and thereby encourages others to feel energized and agentic as well—this commitment fosters a “sense of participation and therefore their ‘buy-in’ to the eventual outcome” (Wodak et al., 2011, p. 604).

This excerpt, however, demonstrates that while the construction of an agentic and committed actor can be an integral part of hope discourse, it does not necessitate the clarification of who the actor is and what they are supposed to do. This happens at the very end of a meeting, where in-depth discussions of mandate and assignments are not expected. However, in this case, the concluding remarks presented in the excerpt do not follow from a meeting where responsibility for action has not been discussed at an earlier stage, which makes the promise of energy empty. The kind of discourse that closes this meeting rather counters the potential claims of nonproductive meetings and lack of action for a circular economy. Things are moving forward, but the forward direction is never really specified. Consequently, nobody can be held accountable because desirable actions are unspecified.

4.8 Excerpt 8: let’s go!

As explored in previous research on inspirational circular economy meetings, collaboration is typically emphasized as essential for the success of circular economy initiatives. Moreover, highlighting the great progress that is made when actors collaborate is a central feature of hope discourse (Rödl et al., 2022). The following excerpt is an example of such a hope discourse and demonstrates how participants can be portrayed as agentic as a collective. This involves discursive acts of bonding, encouragement, and commitment (Wodak et al., 2011). The excerpt is from the launch of a circular economy network that aims to increase the circular flow of nutrients in the agricultural sector. After a short seminar, an inauguration ceremony follows in the meeting, led by Moderators K and L.

- K: [...] eh and now we thought we’d have a small inauguration ceremony we first thought we would cut a ribbon (.) and then we realized that (.) we should actually not do that since we’re supposed to build networks here so we should probably tie a ribbon instead [...] ((ties the ribbon))
- L: like that I think will be absolutely excellent
- K: like a little infinity symbol
- L: e[x
- K: [let’s see (.) if we can get a small fanfare (.)
- K: tada!

- K: tada fantas[tic!
- L: [so now we feel inaugurated and eh tied together every[one
- K: [very much so
- L: yes [...]
- K: and we of course want you to join us (.) so (.) let’s go!
- L: let’s go! [...]

Moderators K and L tie a ribbon as an illustration of networking and collaboration. The infinity symbol represents an integrative process with no end, and it is often associated with the circular economy (Bianchini et al., 2019). The circular flow of nutrients is portrayed as limitless and eternal, which indicates the great potential that the network ascribes to a circular agricultural system. Furthermore, K and L conclude the ceremony by invoking the feeling of being tied together, referring to the bond created between participants, which discursively constructs a group identity (Wodak et al., 2011). Thus, they argue that the ceremony has created a shift in how participants feel, which invokes a change at a deeper embodied level than a cognitive level. This implies that participants now have a greater stake in the initiative and a deeper level of commitment. Furthermore, being bound together entails interdependence and responsibility toward those to whom one is bound (Wodak et al., 2011).

The moderators conclude by directly addressing participants who have yet to join the network and encouraging them to do so. Both exclaim, “let’s go!” which creates a forward momentum and implies a positive development. However, the “we” that is supposed to do the going is not specified and it is unclear in what direction, but it nevertheless constructs a collective on the go, one that is now, after having participated in this ceremony, ready to make a change. This creation of a forward momentum is similar to “exciting to follow” (see Excerpt 1) but different in that an active agent is constructed here and similar to the “energy going forward” example (Excerpt 7) which also lacks the specification of direction. Here, the actor is part of the “going” and not simply observing and supporting.

This excerpt demonstrates how an active agent is constructed and managed in hope discourse through bonding, encouragement, and commitment. The agent is thereby supposed to be responsible for acting toward others. However, the responsibilities of the active agent in this circular economy network are never clarified, other than to join the network. Hence, hope discourse also hereby limits the investigations of how to advance individual and collective actions toward sustainability.

5 Discussion

In this paper, we examine how participants in inspirational circular economy meetings manage issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency—three central but often implicit issues—in hope discourse (Elliott and Olver, 2007; Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015). The overall expressed aim with the studied meetings is to promote a circular economy, provide good examples of circular economy practices, and inspire participants. According to environmental communication research and practice, hope discourse is supposed to promote pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Morris et al., 2020; Ettinger et al., 2021), but our analysis demonstrates a flipside of hope discourse—issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency are generally downplayed when participants navigate

other norms characterizing hope discourse. We argue that this impedes constructive joint investigations into the importance of sustainability transitions.

As demonstrated in the analysis, hope discourse has several social functions. One major function that has featured in several of the examples is the downplaying of discussions about problems or challenges. Participants end talk about problems or challenges on a positive note, shifting the discourse to a more optimistic future scenario and thereby closing down further elaborations on those problems or challenges. Using the conversational strategy of ending negative talk on a positive note serves to “round off and close down ‘troubles telling,’ while simultaneously making it possible for troubles telling to take place” (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2000, p. 805). Ending on a positive note enables the speaker to raise such negative talk without the risk of being held accountable for breaking the hope norm (Rödl et al., 2022). Thus, hope discourse highlights that making negative claims in a social context in which a hope norm dominates is a delicate business that requires the speaker to mitigate accountability for breaking the hope norm. Accountability for a negative statement can also be assuaged by explicitly highlighting that it belongs to the previous speaker and is not agreed with (as in “time is ticking, according to C”).

Notably, it is not only talk about problems or challenges that is being rounded off or closed down in hope discourse. Moral issues in which an urgency to deal with critical issues such as food scarcity is emphasized (see Excerpt 3), and the indirect attribution of individual responsibility to address such issues, is also treated as troubles talk and met with distracting or downplaying discourse. This demonstrates that issues of urgency and responsibility in hope discourse need to be softened when expressed (see Excerpts 2, 3, and 4)—or be expressed indirectly (cf. Sneijder and te Molder, 2005). In Excerpt 6, the facilitator demands responsibility for (non) action, but when this becomes delicate, she downplays her accountability for raising this moral issue, which is reframed by Participant H into a question exempt from moral discussions about responsibility for action.

Hope discourse also highlights issues of agency. In the meetings, a passive “follower” who merely shows support for circular economy initiatives is constructed contrariwise to an active “doer” who implements and realizes initiatives (see Excerpts 1, 2, and 4). Participants use hope as a verb (e.g., “we hope that...”) to hedge talk and thus make it tentative or provisional and to show support for circular economy initiatives while simultaneously avoiding responsibility for its progression. Thus, hoping is constructed as a passive act that places responsibility onto someone else, not requiring anything of the hoper (Elliott and Olver, 2007). However, participants also portray themselves and others as active and agentic by claiming responsibility and making commitments to realize a circular economy. This is done through acts of bonding and encouraging others to use the agency they actually do have. Nevertheless, what they are taking responsibility for or what action should be taken is rarely clarified. Thus, even though participants encourage people to use their agency and attribute them responsibility to do so, they seldom describe what they are supposed to do, which is accentuated in Excerpts 7 and 8.

There is one exception to this (see Excerpt 5), where a participant emphasizes individual responsibility to take action by giving a specific example of a relevant action that is easily accessible. This reflects a cultural idea in the broad societal discourse of hope in which individual action and responsibility are emphasized rather than collective action (Head, 2016). Therefore, although this is an example from our material where concrete action is encouraged, this is action on an individual

level, and the complexity of coordinating and taking responsibility for actions is not considered. This builds on the normative and political ideals of individualization and responsabilization, where hope becomes a matter of exercising choice, personal control, and empowerment (Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015). Although individual action is an important part of sustainability transformation, there is a great disadvantage in reducing it to a matter of individual attitude, behavior, choice, and responsibility and typifying that as the main framework for social change (Shove, 2010; Soneryd and Ugglå, 2015). As Shove (2010) argues, such individualized conception of hope risks obscuring “the extent to which governments sustain unsustainable economic institutions and ways of life, and the extent to which they have a hand in structuring options and possibilities” (p. 1274). Moreover, individualized conceptions provide a very limited foundation for addressing significant societal transformation. This also contributes to depoliticizing environmental issues and placing disproportionate responsibility on individual consumers (Maniates, 2001), which results in a narrow and overly simplified view of green consumption and everyday activities (Soneryd and Ugglå, 2015). Our findings illustrate how a focus on green consumerism becomes a political scapegoat and shifts responsibility for the lack of progress in the sustainability transition of individual consumers (Akenji, 2014), which is far from what a transition to a circular economy demands. As Maniates (2001) argues, this also narrows our collective ability to imagine and pursue productive responses to environmental problems. Based on our theoretical perspective of social interaction as what underpins society and societal transformation, we argue for understanding hoping as a process and an interpersonal and collective activity in which speakers are active participants with the capacity to influence outcomes (Elliott and Olver, 2007). This would align with what is considered required for taking responsibility for and action toward the transition to a circular economy.

Our study complements the intrasubjective view of hope commonly adopted in hope communication research (see Section 2.2.), according to which hope is an individual activity that can be manipulated, measured, and used to shape attitudes and predict behavior (cf. Wiggins et al., 2001; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2000). Instead, our study aligns with research that suggests a more complex and ambiguous relationship between hope discourse and individuals as well as social action (Petersen and Wilkinson, 2015; Lange and Dewitte, 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Park, 2020; Ettinger et al., 2021). We argue that it is necessary to consider this complexity and ambiguity when studying issues of sustainability and communication to promote societal transformation. Our study contributes to such research by adopting a discursive psychology perspective, treating hope discourse as situated and co-constructed in social interactions, rather than as an attitude or emotion reported by individuals. In line with this, the hope discourse in these meetings sets the expectations for what actions are to be taken and by whom. We demonstrate that hope discourse shuts down negative talk of potential importance for the joint exploration of challenges, ambiguities, differences, and disagreements, which are acknowledged as necessary and constructive features of environmental communication and management (Hallgren, 2016; Hallgren et al., 2018).

Moreover, we show that hope discourse overall fosters ambiguity and vagueness regarding issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency in circular economy transition. Wettergren (2025) recognizes the distinction between confidence, which involves actors acting with assumptions of strong agency, and hope, which involves actors acting despite doubting their agency. Accordingly, when hope that something

positive will happen independently of actors' agency is constituted in discourse, further conversations about accountability, responsibility and agency will be treated as unnecessary and disturbing for the business at hand. The positive talk about the future has already met the normative criteria of the hope discourse without introducing discussions of distribution of responsibility for action. This vagueness and ambiguity present challenges for circular economy transition, considering the large-scale collaboration it requires between different actors, often across different sectors (Kovacic et al., 2019). The study builds on empirical material from interorganizational settings. Taking that into consideration, one might argue that it is beyond the frames of these inspirational meetings to discuss and distribute responsibility for future action, and that such discussions are more expected in meetings within an organization. We nevertheless claim that our findings of the communicative procedures for how to evade discussing responsibility and action apply also in intraorganizational settings where it might be within the meeting's mandate to have such discussions. Based on our findings, we argue that the disinclination to discuss responsibility, action-coordination and mobilization is generally tied to hope discourse in problematic ways, but this remains to be further explored.

Finally, we would like to place our study in relation to broader knowledge and practices within environmental communication. Generally, it is acknowledged that the value of hope messages in communications on environmental issues should be emphasized (Christensen and Wormbs, 2017; Kelsey, 2020). Although this norm might be valid in some environmental communication situations and settings, it might also impede communicative ambitions and needs in other situations, such as in managing accountability and responsibility, preparing for individual action, and coordinating collective action. Therefore, it is important for environmental communication scholars to critically engage with and deconstruct hope discourse. Before these scholars join the propagation of hope messages, we argue that they need to seriously consider whether hope discourse would reproduce optimistic but vague encouragements for individual action or if the social interaction concerning hope has the potential to foster authentic hope, which promotes agentic individuals that are part of a powerful collective where responsibilities are made clear.

6 Conclusion

Inspirational meetings that serve to promote the circular economy are limited by hope discourse. The norm of engaging in hope discourse obscures investigations concerning issues of accountability, responsibility, and agency. This allows for considerable ambiguity regarding these three issues and therefore risks reproducing the status quo. They are talked about in ambiguous ways—mentioned and used to perform different social actions—but are rarely explored comprehensively. This in turn means that challenges for realizing a circular economy may be briefly raised but not elaborated upon, hampering the transition to a circular economy from positive attitudes created in hope discourse to people taking responsibility for concrete action.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this paper will be made available on request by the authors without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans in accordance with national legislation (https://etikprovningssmyndigheten.se/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Guide-to-the-ethical-review_webb.pdf). The studies were conducted in accordance with the national legislation and any institutional requirements. Furthermore, the study was waived for the requirement of written informed consent for participation from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with national legislation (https://etikprovningssmyndigheten.se/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Guide-to-the-ethical-review_webb.pdf). However, written informed consent was obtained from the organizers of the participant recruitment and oral informed consent was further confirmed from the participants.

Author contributions

HB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TÅ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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