Utopias for Eco-social Change

Exploring the Synergetic Potential between Utopian Thinking and the Ideal of Sustainability

Master's Thesis

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1 Introduction: Is Sustainability a Utopian Endeavor?

While the term "sustainability" is still relatively young, the idea has – a mere thirty years later – already become highly complex, context-specific, and nuanced. Questions arise of what "sustainability" even encompasses – or perhaps rather what it doesn't. This development has led some scholars to ask whether the very concept of sustainability is, for lack of a better word, sustainable. Can the *idea* of sustainability still productively contribute to the *ideal* of a sustainable world? In his recently published book "Sustainable Action. Overcoming the Barriers", Berg (2019) argues

> "Insofar as this will never be fully possible, the quest for sustainability is utopian" (p. 22).

Similarly, the idea of utopia has received some critical examination in recent history, most prominently perhaps by historian and author Rutger Bregman (2019) who laments that utopias are becoming less and less a part of our outlook on the world as it could be. Meanwhile, a number of sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers have recently discovered that utopias may even serve as even a means to achieve collective transformative action (Levitas, 2013; Milkoreit, 2017; Fernando et al., 2018; Schneider-Mayerson, 2018).

The question then is: If sustainability may be of a utopian nature, and if utopias hold an inherent transformative potential, does exercising utopian thinking work towards the ideal of sustainability? Put differently, does "dreaming" about an ideal sustainable world help that world become reality?
In this exploratory ethnographic study, I try and find indications for what the answer to this question might be - or at least what steps need to be taken to answer it conclusively. To this end, I conducted ethnographic interviews with a small selection of adolescents and young adults from around the globe, asked them about the utopias they would want to live in, and analyzed the results based on a socio-psychological framework for utopias and their transformative potential (Badaan, et al. 2020).

The concrete research questions I wish to answer are:

(1) Are issues of sustainability at all represented in people's visions for an ideal world? If yes, is there a certain priority given to any of them?

and

(2) How do people evaluate their relationships to issues of sustainability when they are addressed in the context of imagining and negotiating utopias?

The aim in answering these questions is to establish if utopian thinking holds the potential to become a valuable tool for facilitating a global sustainability transition. If that is the case, utopias could very well unlock a better understanding, communicating, and democratizing of the discourse around issues of sustainability.

Secondarily, this thesis aims to outline a path towards a potential research design that may make use of imaginaries and utopian thinking. Social sciences and psychology are only recently beginning to develop analytical frameworks in which participants' visions for an ideal world can be made use of productively. With regards to sustainability, this thesis constitutes both an exploration and a prototype of what a utopia-based research design could look like - and what steps need to be taken to further develop it.

Explorative research like this will require a better understanding of its underlying concepts. I will therefore begin this thesis by outlining the barriers to sustainability that inform the idea of this research. I will then also attempt to sketch a brief history of the concept of utopia(s) and its heritage today. Finally, I will use my theoretical chapter to introduce and analyze the recently developed socio-psychological framework by Badaan et al. on which I base my methodology.

My methodological chapter will, in part, address the ethnographic elements that can be found in this research and what they mean for the quality and character of my results. I will outline my open interviewing method and the process of analysis that I used to find my results.

The "Results" chapter will first offer a so-called thick description of the utopias the interviewees offered. It will then present the results of the analysis of SDG occurrences in the interviewees' utopias. During this section, I will also introduce four supplementary goals that could be identified in the imaginaries. The third section of this chapter, will present the findings with regards to construal levels and hope. These findings will serve as indicators to the relationship the interviewees experiences with their respective utopias, as well as to the transformative potential of the exercise itself.

In the "Discussion" chapter, I will attempt to draw conclusions with regards to the importance of sustainability issues in young people's utopias. Similarly, I will try to evaluate the transformative potential of utopias within the proposed research design. Finally, I will provide an assessment of the relationship between sustainability and utopias based off the findings of this research.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, my focus will lie on providing an outlook on what this relationship may evolve into and the potentials this development would hold. I will outline a potential research agenda to strengthen this field and propose a call for action.

2 Theoretical Background

To roll out the metaphorical carpet on which this work stands, it makes sense to first examine the two concepts I am trying to bring in synergetic contact with each other in this research: Sustainability and Utopias. To go into depths about either of these concepts would likely extend beyond the frameworks of this thesis, so I will instead attempt to answer the following questions before presenting my research:

> 1) Why does the idea of sustainability pose problems to translating it into transformative change?
> 2) What are the heritage and nuances of utopias that we need to take into consideration when operating with this concept?
> 3) Why is there a potential for synergy between the two concepts and how may we make use of it?

2.1 Barriers to Sustainability

To answer the question why the idea of sustainability poses problems for a translation into transformative change principles, I am borrowing the phrase "Barriers to Sustainability" off of Christian Berg's recent book "Sustainable Action: Overcoming the Barriers". In it, Berg outlines a set of barriers that keep us from reaching the ideal of sustainability, and determines a range of principles that - if implemented in decision-making processes and daily life behavior - could guide us towards more sustainable actions. Barriers mentioned include, for example, "complexity", "moral limitations", "market failure", or "populism and fundamentalism". Principles for action include "decarbonize", "strengthen social cohesion and collaboration", "celebrate frugality", or "foster diversity".

Before diving into barriers and principles for action, however, Berg briefly opens up a more fundamental discussion: Should we keep "sustainability" as a term, concept, and ideal or discard it? Berg asks this question, because he observes that the existence of and subscription to the concept of "sustainability" seems to not be doing its job of actually transitioning us towards a good life for all - or at the very least it is not doing its job well and fast enough (Berg 2019, pp. 1–3).

This resonates with findings by other scholars who found limitations in the idea of sustainability. At this point, however, it makes sense to bracket out the theoretical discussion around the term and concept, because it would exceed the framework of this thesis - and instead focus on the practical problems with the idea sustainability.

First of all, we need to acknowledge that the idea of sustainability is an inherently complex and transdisciplinary one: Its heritage may be one of environmental concerns. However, the idea's originality and attractiveness in today's era stems from its ability to put environmental, societal and economic issues under its umbrella and to address the interconnectedness of these three dimensions. As Hoppe and Wolling (2017) posit, this is both its strength and its weakness, as it increases the uncertainty about what is and isn't a matter of sustainability (p. 340).

This is evident perhaps most pointedly in the field of sustainability communication. Here, it becomes a particularly vexing challenge to not only communicate issues of sustainability to audiences, but also to enable citizen participation in the solving of such complex and interwoven issues (Fischer 2019).

As a consequence, studies show that sustainability is often reduced to its ecological component and specifically the ecological responsibility of consumers (Krainer et al. 2018, p. 135). Notably, this is not only a perception by the recipients, but also a conscious approach from the communicators' end to reduce complexity. Beyond this ecological dimension, sustainability is only rarely analyzed or explained itself which adds to the relatively mismanaged use of the term (ibid.).

Krainer, et al. (2018) found that the feedback media representatives had regarding the practicality of the term sustainability corroborate this observation. Journalists would evaluate the idea of sustainability as something with both a strong positive connotation and little practical journalistic value because of its unclear definition (p. 138). Because sustainability furthermore implies the aforementioned moral responsibilities on the consumers' end, media representatives view it not only as impractical but also as ethically problematic. Sustainability runs the danger to become a normative plea, instead of a rational subject for constructive debate and action (ibid.). All of this lead Krainer, et al. to conclude that from a communication perspective, the complexity of the idea of sustainability cannot be effectively translated for large audiences - especially when confronted with the realities of today's media culture and economy. It is instead reduced to issues of ecological sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility with little consideration of the intersections between these and other dimensions.

The bottom line that seems to transpire from these arguments is that "sustainability" as a term and concept appears unfit - at least in a practical sense - for the communicating and making-actionable of how to reach a good life for all. The underlying issue to these barriers might be that the concept of sustainability is perhaps not meant to describe a fixed object for study or an event that can be reported on. Instead, it describes a normative idea (Hoppe and Wolling 2017, p. 340). As such, it translates poorly to scientific

study or action-oriented debate because it describes a direction, a beacon that can be moved towards, rather than a fixed destination, end goal, or set of measurable variables. Berg's question of whether or not we should do away with the concept of sustainability altogether is founded on this mismatch of what the idea of sustainability seems to be able to deliver, and what we expect it to.

Going back to Berg, his answer to his own question swings around into a counter-argument:

> "we need to keep sustainability as an ideal; an ideal which we might never reach, which might be utopian, but even as such it is a necessary one (2019, p. 5)."

In writing this, Berg acknowledges the fact that - despite, for instance, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals trying to set concrete and arguably achievable targets - sustainability as an ideal might very well be utopian in the sense that it is a normative idea that can never be fully achieved. However, he still argues in favor of keeping the concept for the merit of its unifying and orienting properties. His bottom line is that even a utopian ideal can be practical to the working towards a good life for all.

2.2 Understanding Utopias: From More to Science Fiction

More's utopia

The term "utopia" traces back to Thomas More's 1516 work of fiction that is known today under that very name: "Utopia"[1]. In his story, "Utopia" is the name of the fictional island that the narrator travels to and explores. The often-quoted story goes that More coined the word by combining the two Greek terms *eu-topos* (= "good place") and *ou-topos* (="no place") to create the idea of a good place that - at the same time - does not exist. We know today that there might be a nuance to this coinage that might seem technical at first, but that provides an interesting starting point in understanding why with the concept of utopia the devil is, as they say, in the detail:

Scholar and chairperson of the Utopian Studies Society Europe Fátima Vieira (2010) argues that when conceptualizing the name of its fictional place, More probably only used "ou" (as in "no"), reducing it to "u", and added a combination of "topos" and "-ia" to mean "place" (p. 4). The paradox More thus creates in "utopia" is much more fundamental than the one between a "good place" and a "non-existent place": It's between the basic existence and non-existence of a place. This is further supported by the fact that More

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[1] The original Latin title translates to: "A little, true book, not less beneficial than enjoyable, about how things should be in a state and about the new island Utopia".

initially planned to use "Nusquama" as the name for his imaginary island - which, drawn from the Latin word "nusquam" simply means "nowhere" (ibid.).

So where then did the idea of "utopia" as a good place come from? The world More describes depicts features that for his time might have seemed positive or even progressive: He discusses, among others, state-controlled education, religious pluralism, the right to divorce, and women's rights (Marc'hadour 1998). However, the stronger claim to this positive meaning behind the concept can be found at the end of his work: There, he published a poem that reads, in part,

> "[Utopia's] inhabitants and its laws are so wonderful that it should be called Eutopia instead of Utopia." (Vieira 2010, pp. 4–5).

This, of course, explains the origin of the idea that "utopia" would stem, in part, from the term "eu-topos". More importantly, however, "eutopia" – which is pronounced exactly the same as "utopia" in More's native language English - becomes the punch line of the story instead of its myth of origin (ibid.). More's utopia primarily means a place that exists and does not exist at the same time. The positive nature that it is imbued with is secondary, and a design choice by its author.

The tension of a place that is both existent and non-existent would shape the understanding of what the idea of utopia – even, or particularly, when framed positively – means until today. Moreover, the different ways in which this tension is resolved help explain frequently voiced criticism for the idea of using utopias for practical purposes.

Critical views on utopia

Criticism on utopias often makes mention of the former Soviet Union and the pain communism caused to its citizens at the time. However, history is full of the abuse of visions of alleged peace, order, and a good life (Bregman 2019, p. 22): Fascism, Nazism, racism, eugenics, and many more radical religious and secular movements have been responsible for suffering all around the globe. It can therefore be of little surprise that some scholars entirely reject the idea of utopias having any meaningful place outside of the sterile environment of historical analyses.

This criticism is, in part, based off of understandings of utopia that view it as disruptive or manipulative in the first place: The anthropologist Chodorkoff (2014), for instance, defines utopia as "a description of an approach to social reconstruction oriented toward the creation of an 'ideal' society" (p. 123). In his view, utopias always include revolutionary and disruptive elements in order to achieve a good life. And the danger lies in the subjectivity and normativity of what is considered "a good life" (ibid., p. 124).

There have been many attempts by scholars to deepen and differentiate this monochrome understanding of

utopia, and to detect the dangerous and the desirable in it: Vieira (2010), for instance, identifies four dimensions according to which utopias may be defined: Their content, their literary genre and form, their function, and the desire for a better life that they are an expression of (p. 6). She rejects every but that last dimension as too limiting and potentially dangerous. Utopias, she argues, should be most importantly seen as "a matter of attitude" and as an emotional expression.

Other classifications would draw a distinction between, for example, iconoclastic and blueprint utopias or heuristic and systemic utopias. In both instances the focus is on the degree to which the utopias are an already laid out plan or a vague and/or hypothetical expression of a desire. And in both these classifications the more direct interpretation tends to be rejected in favor for the more vague one (Levitas 2013, p. xvi). These instances also make it clear that what is viewed as the dangerous element in utopias tends to be their, at times, dangerously prescriptive and limiting nature - not their function as expressions of a desire for a better world, or their hypothetical potential.

The question then becomes what the purposes of such hypothetical and desire-based utopias could be. Ruth Levitas (2013) identifies three potential functions of utopias: Compensation, critique and change (p. 107). Compensation includes the idea of utopias as a means of escapism and nihilism. Critique means the function of utopias to reflect on the status quo. And change signifies the transformative potential of utopias towards their creators and the creators' environments. While there seems to be little consensus as to which of the functions should be preferred (Levitas 2010, p. 208), this classification at least allows for a vocabulary to discuss how utopias may be both conceptualized with different targets in mind, and utilized for various purposes. With this vocabulary, the following discussion of examples for contemporary manifestations of utopias will prove significantly more straightforward.

SSPs

Shared Socioeconomic Pathways (short: SSPs), are a range of plausible scenarios that map out global change up until 2100. There are five shared socioeconomic pathways in total that attempt to cover a range of possible extreme and compromise scenarios. The five scenarios are called "Sustainability", "Regional Rivalry", "Inequality", "Fossil-fueled Development", and "Middle-of-the-road" (Nikoleris et al. 2017, p. 309; Riahi et al. 2017, p. 153). The SSPs are created at the global scale by international organizations - most crucially the UNFCCC and their network (Milkoreit 2017, p. 9).

However, their intended audience tends not to be political or societal, but scientific: SSPs are not primarily intended as a communication device for policy-making or for broader societal discourse, but rather as a common language for research communities (O'Neill et al. 2017, pp. 170–171). As such, their purpose is to help facilitate scientific discussion around the potential pathways of global development and their effects.

They may inform common research goals around mitigation strategies, adaptation options, and the changes to the planet's ecosystem (Riahi et al. 2017, p. 154).

What makes SSPs compelling in the framework of this particular research, is that they provide a pointed example for how shared narratives about possible futures are already being used to inform real-world decisions on today's most pressing issues. More than just a prediction tool, the SSPs make a point to map out the potential futures not only through data points, but through a common language for what these data points may mean. In doing so, their utopias, dystopias, and in-betweens, allow for what we desire to become a relevant factor in their usage.

Science Fiction

To move from SSPs to Science fiction may seem like a thematic jump. However, science fiction, too, holds its own relationship with science and societal discourse that is worth exploring with respect to its utopian potential: Brake and Hook (2010) stipulate that "[Science fiction's] task is to inspire those reading to open their minds up to the inherent possibilities that exist within science" (p. 45). As such, science fiction's role with respect to science and society is one of a negotiator for the role of science in society and for the transformational responsibility imposed on scientists in their research (Mellor 2003, pp. 515–516). Similar to the SSPs, science fiction offers a common language and a space to discuss different narratives for future development (Milkoreit 2017, p. 7). Dissimilar to SSPs, however, science fiction remains specific to particular places and events, and imbues these settings with thoughts and emotions. This results in a very different, more subjective, but also more open engagement that the reader, listener, or viewer can have with the future that they are presented with (Nikoleris et al. 2017, p. 309).

Science fiction thus also adds a reflexive element the SSPs don't have, namely the question of "Why" (ibid., p. 318): Why should I choose to root for this or any other imaginary futuristic scenario? Science fiction is not only about a hypothetical end and the means to get there, but also about the desire the imaginary evokes in its audience and the negotiation of that desire.

However, Science fiction has its own limitations: It might seem tempting to extend the meaning-making role of science fiction into a role of *communicating* scientific research. However, assuming that this works, would disregard the fact that science fiction and science communication follow different sets of principles (Meyer 2017, p. 59). Neither can we assume that this would be desirable in the first place. Using science fiction to communicate findings might hold unforeseen effects on the dissemination of research (Menadue and Cheer 2017, p. 13). In order to be meaningful for societal discourse, science fiction does not need one scientific truth, but a plurality of scenarios. Good science fiction, as Warren Ellis puts it, is about laying out

different possible pathways and relating these pathways back to the status quo (Brake and Hook 2008, p. 251).

The utopian potential of science fiction is further hampered by the quite fundamental fact that many - perhaps most - works of science fiction depict worlds that are dystopian or partially dystopian. Climate fiction, a subgenre that focuses on climatic developments and their effects in the near or long-term future, employs the so-called "disaster frame" particularly often. These frames then lead to affective responses that actually hinder persuasion and mobilization (Schneider-Mayerson 2018, pp. 489–490). Schneider-Mayerson (2018) found that this is particularly true for politically conservative readers of these dystopian narratives (pp. 491–492). We can therefore conclude that to hold a proper utopian potential, science fiction would need to employ positive - or at least partially positive - narratives itself.

Fernando, et al. (2020) divide positive – i.e. utopian – science fiction up into two categories: Those that create utopian conditions through abundance, and those that create these conditions through sufficiency (p. 2). Fernando et al. argue that the former employ a maximization principle (as in that they increase the material and temporal wealth of their population), whereas the latter employs a moderation principle, that balances human well-being with ecological sustainability. It is these kinds of scenarios that we need to consider when discussing what science fiction can teach us about the transformational potential of utopias.

This transformative potential of science fiction utopias can already be observed relatively close to the readers' experiences: Readers in Schneider-Mayerson's (2018) study confirmed that being confronted with different scenarios enabled them to imagine potential climate futures themselves (p. 482). As opposed to the scientific observation of the existing, science fiction offered them tools to focus on what *may* exist, instead (Hook and Brake 2010, p. 45).

Beyond that, however, science fiction utopias allow for a discussion of our actions in the present (Schneider-Mayerson 2018, p. 484). This is insofar crucial as they become a reflective tool for the reader, and a motivation to embrace or work towards a change that would have otherwise been difficult to accept (Menadue and Cheer 2017, p. 2). As such, it may be argued that science fiction utopias have held a potential to influence meaningful real-world change through their imagination of different potential futures. Finally, we need to consider the quasi-democratic characteristic of science fiction utopias: Through their plurality, these scenarios may not only influence readers individually, but hold the potential for larger exchange around the futures we would like to live in. With an increasing readership, lower publishing thresholds, and the open internet for non-professional and fan fiction authors to make their own[2], the active and wide-spread discussion of the futures we might want to live in arguably already exists (Schneider-

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[2] Not to speak of active online and offline communities that deal with science fiction videogames, tabletop games, live action role-playing, artwork, and much more.

Mayerson 2018, p. 493). Science fiction offers dimensions of accessibility - particularly in its form, cost-efficacy, language, and community-building - that other fields with utopian potentials may not be able to provide (Milkoreit 2017, p. 8). These best-practices may, and perhaps should, inform future projects that look into the transformative potential of utopias more generally.

Imaginaries

The third contemporary example for a dealing with utopias is drawn from social sciences and the concept of "imaginaries". Contrary to the SSPs, imaginaries don't describe shared scientific, but shared societal imaginations (Milkoreit 2017, p. 2). For example, an imaginary in relation to climate change could therefore mean to have a shared vision for of the future that includes values and ideas around climate change, and that is informed by how the imagining group of people perceives change and transformation more generally (ibid., p. 3).

According to Milkoreit (2017), the process behind imaginaries includes two dimensions: Cognitive-emotional processes and socio-political processes, or, put more bluntly, individual and collective processes (p. 4). An imaginary may therefore exist in a person's mind and may evoke very individual emotions, but may also simultaneously exist as part of shared discourse around imaginaries within a social group (ibid., pp. 5–6). To understand these two dimensions of imaginaries can provide a similar understanding around where and how utopias may exist and how both an individual level and a societal level have to be considered and may be difficult to untangle.

A productive and future-oriented understanding of utopias

Ever since the Marxist project failed and the Soviet Union collapsed, utopias have been observed and analyzed with more caution and scrutiny. While there are still scholars who will object that every utopia inevitably fails and turns dystopian, the communist heritage has been resolved by warning against so-called blueprint utopias and adopting an understanding of utopias as productive expressions of desire or hypothetical scenarios to facilitate societal dialogue.

The examples above show that practices that venture more or less on the fringes of imagining utopias already exist, and that they hold the potential for inspiring a conscious and targeted employing of utopias as transformative tools. They also imply that when employed this way, utopias may hold a significant potential for societal dialogue and change.

Moving away from the top-down blueprint understanding, utopias in their new form become more democratic, process-oriented, and microcosmic (Vieira 2010, p. 22). If imagined this way, utopias may induce both stability and innovation instead of imposing a rigid and non-inclusive mold on its social groups.

Utopias may become both a personal tool and a societal process for wide-spread reflection, goal-setting, and action (Milkoreit 2017, p. 6, 2017, p. 5; Bregman 2019, p. 28).

Today's research seems to imply that the initial tension that is still present in the concept of utopia - the tension between utopia being both an existent and non-existent place - can actually be productive to a healthy understanding of utopias, and a navigation and perhaps even facilitation of global change. We have seen quite a few warning signs about the possible pitfalls and dangers one can encounter when dealing with utopias, but also the creative potentials one might find when employing them cautiously and consciously (Vieira 2010, p. 23). In his book, "Utopia for Realists" Bregman (2016) summarizes his thoughts with regard to the concept of utopia:

> "So why write off the utopianism? Should we simply stop dreaming of a better world altogether? No, of course not." (p. 16).

This statement is reminiscent of the thoughts Berg voiced when speaking about the concept of sustainability. Bregman, too, emphasizes the quality of "dreaming of a better world" and advocates for making use of this quality. This juncture of the imaginary and the transformational may be where sustainability and utopianism meet. Sustainability, even in a utopian form, may still hold transformational potential because utopias do. This hypothesis constitutes the basis for the following research. However, we will first need explore the question of how to operationalize exploring this transformational potential through existing frameworks.

2.3 Socio-Psychological Model for Transformative Utopias

The discussion surrounding utopias and their place in today's society has seen a resurgence in popularity in recent years. This is mostly true for publications in popular science, but also for academic research. Similarly, the framework I will be basing most of my research design on has only been developed quite recently. This socio-psychological model has been developed by Badaan et al. (2020) with the intent to shed light on the connection between utopian thinking and social change. On an operational level, they aim to outline paths between the two, and identify variables that need to be considered on these paths.
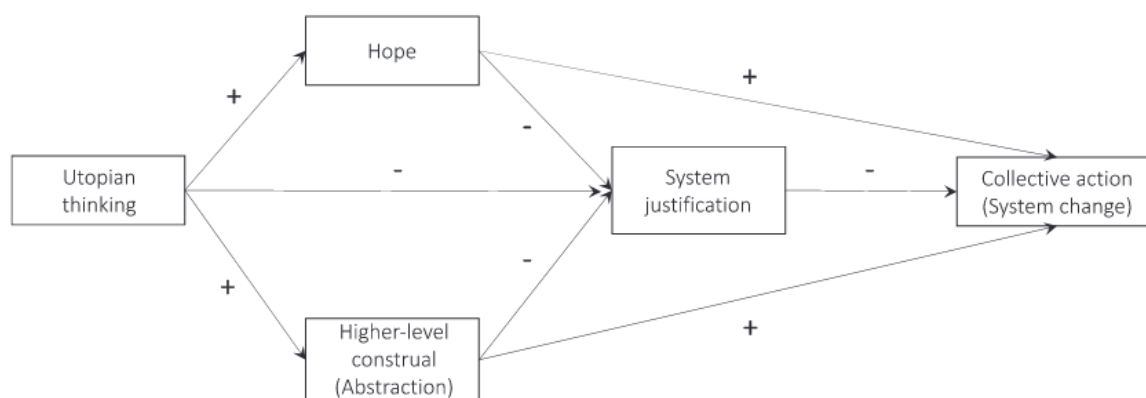
Figure 1: Socio-psychological framework for transformative utopias (Badaan et al. 2020)

The model highlights three variables in total: Hope, Higher-level construal (Abstraction), and System Justification. The former two, hope and higher-level construal, are considered routes[3] towards social change. System justification acts as a form of inverse control or barrier that will always need to be overcome no matter which route is taken.

System justification relates to the well-documented tendency of people to justify or support a status quo or already existing systems - at times even in the face of obvious disadvantages that this support would impose on themselves and their peers (Badaan et al. 2020, p. 2). Research has shown that this tendency to justify the status quo holds a direct connection to the readiness to support, for example, pro-environmental policies or changes (ibid., p. 3). As such, it constitutes an important barrier for social change, not only with respect to utopian thinking, but also in relationship to many other possible strategies. System justification can be used within the framework of this research to check for and understand the barriers interviewees might experience on the otherwise outlined routes of hope and higher-level construal.

Higher-level construal

Large bodies of research seem to prove that the further away - psychologically speaking - an event or goal, the less likely a person is to invest themselves in it. Recent research has suggested, however, that this does not necessarily mean that psychologically distant events or goals don't spark motivation in people. Instead, it changes the conditions for engagement:

Firstly, the psychological distance needs to be bridged through mental abstraction. This brings distant goals or events closer to the individual's mind again and activates motivation to pursue these goals (Badaan et al. 2020, pp. 7–8). Secondly, the subject's features have to become more focused on central and goal-relevant

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[3] also called the "affective route" and the "cognitive-motivational route" respectively by Badaan et al.

aspects. More goal-irrelevant and tangential aspects are instead pushed to the back (Trope and Liberman 2012, p. 126). Thirdly, the success to spark motivation in an individual becomes more dependent on the desirability of an activity - and less so on its feasibility (ibid.). Under these higher-level construal conditions, individuals become more able and motivated to engage with scenarios that are distant in terms of temporal, spatial, or social aspects - as well as with scenarios that are deeply hypothetical (Trope and Liberman 2012, p. 124).

The question then becomes how to measure construal levels for the purposes of this and other research. We have seen that there seems to exist a connection between construal levels and psychological distance. The common assumption would be that they stand in a positive correlation to each other: The further distant something is, the higher its level of abstraction (Trope and Liberman 2012, p. 124). However, meta-analyses by Soderberg, et al. (2015) indicate that the effect of psychological distance on construal levels is only medium-sized (p. 543). So while there seems to be some correlation, it cannot be considered sufficient for an unmistakable interpretation of findings.

TABLE 1. Construal Level Theory Expectations for Decision Making Regarding Near vs. Distant Events

Near	Distant
Construal	
Concrete	Abstract
Complex	Simple
Inductive, effortful	Deductive, theory-based
Focus on means (how)	Focus on ends (why)
Implications	
Evaluation of future plans based on feasibility of means	Evaluation of future plans based on desirability of ends
Little optimism bias	Substantial optimism bias
Greater fear of errors of commission	Greater fear of errors of omission

Figure 2: Construal Level Theory indicators (Krebs and Rapport 2012)

The following research will therefore instead make use of the Construal Level Theory by Krebs and Rapport (2012) and the indicators they developed (fig. 2). According to their model, high-level construal of imagined utopias would be described in abstract, simple, and deductive terms, and focus on the ends rather than the means by which they might be achieved. The model also predicts the aforementioned focus on the desirability of the goals in higher-level construal, as well as an optimistic bias and a fear to leave things out in the description of utopias.

There are further implications of high-level construal that have been suggested by various authors: High-level construal seems to hold the potential to support self-control and a certain sense of realism when it comes to one's own abilities (Badaan et al. 2020, p. 8). Moreover, higher-level construal may have positive implications for our social abilities and empathy. Findings by Trope and Liberman (2012) suggest that higher-level construal leads individuals to include people from socially diverse backgrounds more readily in their considerations (p. 128). Beyond that, higher-level construal seems to fuel discussion in integrative ways and with an increased motivation to reach win-win situations between different parties (Badaan et al. 2020, p. 8). These implications very pointedly depict the transformative potential in higher-level construal and why it may have been considered as one route towards social change in Badaan et al.'s model.

Hope

The second route to social change is hope. We have established in previous sections that utopias may be most accurately portrayed as expressions of desire. Depending on the degree to which this desire is hopeful, a utopia might turn from escapist and cynical to change-oriented and transformative. If, on the negative end of the spectrum, an imaginary is not utopian at all, but dystopian, it expresses fears rather than hope (Milkoreit 2017, p. 13).

Hope, then, functions as the catalyst to the transformative potential of utopias and does so in a few ways: Firstly, it turns the utopia, which is inherently hypothetical, into a potential personal future (Badaan et al. 2020, p. 6). This, secondly, also increases the constructive intentions of the individual. The individual becomes more willing to contribute to and accept social change (Fernando et al. 2018, p. 7; Greenaway et al. 2016, p. 94). Finally, hope raises an individual's optimism that any personal action contributed to a group effort could be successful, and thus increases the chances that that person follows through on their intentions (Badaan et al. 2020, p. 6). A hope that depicts this orientation towards societal - rather than individual - betterment, may also be called "social hope". Recently, some scholars have been pointing towards the lack of such hope as a barrier to meaningful social change (ibid., p. 5).

Appendix

The State Hope Scale

Directions: Read each item carefully. Using the scale shown below, please select the number that best describes *how you think about yourself right now* and put that number in the blank provided. *Please take a few moments to focus on yourself and what is going on in your life at this moment. Once you have this "here and now" set,* go ahead and answer each item according to the following scale: 1 = *Definitely False*; 2 = *Mostly False*; 3 = *Somewhat False*; 4 = *Slightly False*; 5 = *Slightly True*; 6 = *Somewhat True*; 7 = *Mostly True*; and 8 = *Definitely True*.

____1. If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.
____2. At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals.
____3. There are lots of ways around any problem that I am facing now.
____4. Right now I see myself as being pretty successful.
____5. I can think of many ways to reach my current goals.
____6. At this time, I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself.

Note. When administering the measure, it is labeled the Goals Scale. The even-numbered items are agency, and the odd-numbered items are pathways. Subscale scores for agency or pathways are derived by adding the three even- and odd-numbered items, and the total State Hope Scale score is the sum of all six items.

Figure 3: State hope scale (Snyder et al. 1996)

To measure hope, psychologists have been using the so-called "State Hope Scale" (fig. 3) for over twenty years. It outlines a set of questions that may be answered on a scale of one to eight. These ratings will then indicate a score in two dimensions of hope: agency and pathways.

Agency reflects a self-assessment of being able to reach one's goals and solve problems in a variety of ways. On the State Hope Scale, the individual's degree of perceived agency is assessed through statements like "If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.", "There are lots of ways around any problem that I am facing now.", or "I can think of many ways to reach my current goals." (Snyder et al. 1996).

Pathways, conversely, is being assessed by having the participants rate statements that relate to how well they think they are "on track" with their current goals or think of themselves as successful. The statements that are used are "At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals.", "Right now I see myself as being pretty successful.", and "At this time, I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself." (ibid.).

There are some nuances to the framework by Badaan et al. that may need to be considered for this and future research[4]. The model is based on previous research conducted by Fernando et al. (2018; 2020) who have analyzed utopias and their transformative potential from different perspectives. They have found that the transformative potential of utopias might, for instance, be heavily reliant on the contents of the utopias (Fernando et al. 2020, p. 6). They specifically draw a distinction between sufficiency and abundance imaginaries (as discussed in chapter 2.2) and find that positively evaluated sufficiency utopias elicit a

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[4] And given the recentness of the model it is to be expected that further review will reveal other caveats.

greater motivation for change than their counterparts. In fact, abundance utopias will display no correlation with motivation whatsoever. This puts different utopias onto different starting positions on their roads towards a social change potential, depending on their content. And the relationship between abundance utopias and Badaan et al.'s framework has yet to be explored.

A second nuance that may be worth exploring is that of perceived participative efficacy. Participative efficacy is the belief or non-belief that one's own actions can constitute a valuable contribution to a group effort. This perception has been found to hold a strong positive correlation with the social change potential in Badaan et al.'s framework (Fernando et al. 2020, p. 4).
Badaan et al. (2020) resolve this tension by exploring the relationship between participative efficacy and system justification. Participative efficacy hereby predicts the challenging of systems, but only for low-status group members (p. 3). We therefore have to also consider both status and perceived participatory efficacy to be variables that may skew how much potential for social change there is in any given utopian imaginary.

Finally, there may also be practical details that need to be explored. For instance, in their work, Oettingen et al. (2012) found that the mental contrasting in utopian thinking - i.e. the comparing between the imagined and the real - may need to follow a certain order: Her findings suggest that the motivational effect of an imaginary is stronger when the individual first imagines the utopia and only afterwards contrasts this imagination with the status quo, compared to the other way round (p. 995).

While these nuances certainly need to be considered for any research design, they do not fatally infringe on the - as Fernando et al. (2018) put it - "robust"-ness of the connection between utopian thinking and social change behavior (p. 10). We may therefore assume that the framework still provides a valid starting point for exploring the transformative potential of utopias in relationship to sustainability.

3 Methods and Research Process

3.1 Ethnographic Research Design

We can, very generally, consider a research design ethnographic when it is carried out in a natural setting involving face-to-face interaction with its participants and when it uses both qualitative and quantitative data to answer its research questions. These may in turn be evolving throughout the process or developed through interaction with the research participants (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, p. 12). As such, ethnographic methods can be useful when encountering new fields. They allow for the exploration of a setting without the problem or research questions necessarily being completely clear (ibid., p. 35). The present study required some degree of exploratory flexibility, mainly because the idea of exposing participants to utopias had not yet been used outside of literary and psychological research. Neither had the question of whether utopias automatically connect to sustainability issues ever been addressed in this form or fashion as far as I can assess. Some of the foreseeable uncertainties included: The creative ability of participants to imagine and discuss utopia; issues participants would address beyond the SDGs; the biographic backgrounds of participants and their influence on the utopian designs; and the participants' diverse cultural backgrounds and their possible influence on the understanding of the tasks. The research design therefore required a certain agility and certainly a closeness to the participants to properly navigate these uncertain variables - but also to keep an open mind for a potential shifting of the research questions along the way.

Consequentially, the research questions are framed in an exploratory manner as well: Instead of posing "why"-questions that assume prior knowledge of a predetermined problem, I chose to pose hypotheses that would allow for the possibility of the question being irrelevant, or having to be adapted, too. For example, my first research question "Are issues of sustainability at all represented in people's visions for an ideal world? If yes, is there a certain priority given to any of them?" allowed my interview partners to point towards completely different aspects that might be relevant in their visions and opened up discussion around that. The question might be framed as a simple yes-or-no question. However, the ethnographic interview

would still capture enough detail and context that an analysis beyond a simple confirmation or denial of the initial question becomes possible and worthwhile.

To provide an example: Sustainable Development Goal 16, "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions", was represented in some form or another in almost all participants' visions. However, which targets were addressed, and with what emotionality, varied from person to person. A female black rights activist from the US interviewed shortly after the killing of George Floyd will conceive of "Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions" very differently than a Bangladeshi international aid worker or an Indonesian education activist. An ethnographic perspective on these utopias allows for contextualizing and discovering a significance and nuance beyond the testing of a hypothesis. Beyond that, it also allowed for the research process to be agile enough that a range of different perspectives on the SDGs and other utopian elements could be captured, contextualized, and analyzed. An ethnographic research methodology therefore very much lends itself to both a depth and flexibility that was necessary for the exploratory nature of these research questions (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, p. 44; O'Reilly 2013, p. 2).

Many of the implications that this usage of an ethnographic methodology holds will be discussed in the following sections. At this point, however, it might be prudent to already address the effects of an ethnographic research design on its presentation in this thesis: One key element of ethnographic research is the acknowledgment that the researcher and their field stand in a mutually influencing relationship towards each other (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, p. 12). The researcher accounts for this fact by making transparent where this influence may have affected methods or findings. This is usually achieved - and will be done similarly in this paper - in a couple of ways:

Ethnographic Narratives

The first pathway is to make influences and biases as transparent as possible. In terms of presenting scientific findings this means choosing the proper language or "narrative" as Bredenstein et al. (2013) put it (pp. 181–182). They point towards three different narratives an ethnographic writer can pursue: The *realistic narrative* that presents results as if they were factual truths and removes the scientist from the findings; the *processual narrative* that puts the scientist at center stage and explains findings in the context of the ethnographer's own personal experience - meaning in the context of surprised, confused, shocked, etc. emotions; and the *reflexive narrative* in which the ethnographer imbues their findings with legitimacy by, paradoxically, questioning whether their authority on the subject matter is justified and whether the results of their research would be replicable at all.

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to go with the latter perspective, the *reflexive narrative*. As a

means towards transparency, it lends itself best to a field that is - unconventionally for ethnographic research - explicitly culturally diverse and does not allow for prolonged personal contact with the research subjects. Taking on a processual narrative, for instance, would fail in this case because of a mere lack of emotionally-laden experience. Nonetheless, this narrative still allows for potential complexity and contradictory findings which may both occur when exploring a new field. A realistic narrative would somewhat remove this possibility or would at least require the filtering of such ambiguous findings. Because of its self-questioning nature, following a reflexive narrative still holds the caveat of also somewhat diminishing the findings' claim of validity. This is a downside I am content in taking into account for the purposes of this research. As the goal of this endeavor is to identify the questions that arise when examining such a new field, being able to point towards more or less situational findings will be more than sufficient. This approach will also adequately allow for the identification of future research questions that might then require other research designs in order to be answered.

Following a reflexive narrative in this thesis will mean that I will present many of my findings from a first-person perspective - as opposed to an impersonal and removed narration - and that I will question my own authorship and authority at times throughout the thesis. This questioning will take place particularly in the discussion part of this paper. Beyond that, I will attempt to avoid detaching my findings from the temporal, cultural, and, at times, political context they are embedded in. Instead, I will aim to lay these dependencies open as best as possible and feasible.

Description of the field

The second pathway complements the idea of laying open the contexts of one's findings and revolves around a thorough description of the field. Ethnographies typically include a description of the field in which the research was undertaken before any findings are described. In this thesis, I will include descriptions of my field within the later sections of this methodological chapter. Specifically, these will include short introductions of my interview partners, a thorough description of how the interviews were set up and conducted, and a contextualizing of the point(s) in time when the interviews took place.

In ethnographies, the idea behind describing one's field as detailed as possible stems from a desire to present findings - deeply qualitative and influenced by personal perspectives as they may be - as accurately and unmistakably as possible. The description of a field will also act as a control for the next ethnographer who will inevitably find the place, people, and culture of a setting changed or who will perceive of the field very differently. Being able to point towards differences between the records and one's own experienced reality then allows for the researcher to better understand the dependencies of their own findings. For this thesis,

the hope is that describing my interview partners, the setting of the interviews, and the time they took place in, will allow for a stronger replicability of my results and may shed a light on the blind spots I may have had during the exploration of this field.

"Thick Description"

Finally, the third pathway follows the characteristic "thick description" when it comes to an ethnographic presentation of findings. Describing ethnographic results in ways that honor their complexity and multidimensionality has been established as a common practice by Clifford Geertz in 1987 (Breidenstein et al. 2013, p. 180). He posits that reducing the complexity of ethnographic findings would take away from what makes these findings valuable in the first place - not only to fellow ethnographers, but also to other disciplines[5]. Ethnographies have ever since tended to remain true to this maxim and have allowed for different degrees of ambiguity, complexity, and intricacy to become a part of the presentation of their findings.

For this thesis, I will make room for more descriptive presentations of my findings in the results section. Through this, I want to be able to (1) make room for the interviewees' utopian visions in as much detail as feasible, (2) take into consideration not only what has been said, but also how it has been said, and (3) render findings as unmistakable as possible. Together with the previous pathways I hope for this to strengthen the claim of validity of my results.

3.2 Approach to Interviewee Selection

At the outset of gathering my data, the fundamental question arose of whether to opt for a focused or a very wide-spread group of interviewees. Traditionally, ethnographic research takes place in very confined settings with a limited group of stakeholders, so as to reduce the cultural complexity wider frames would bring with them. Instead, the aim is dive deeply into a small setting with the objective of unearthing novel cultural findings. In recent decades, ethnographic research has taken on many different forms and foci, but often the fields tend to stay relatively compact. However, since my research was going to be explicitly exploratory, I eventually decided to opt for a geographically wide-spread target group while at the same time limiting the selection through other variables.

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[5] Geertz specifically zeroes in on the sociological usefulness of ethnographic findings.

Firstly, I decided to only interview subjects who were born after 1987 which marks the year that the book "Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development", also known as the "Brundtland Report", was published. This decision was reached based on the assumption that people who have grown up with the word "sustainability" in their vocabulary may have a fundamentally different perspective on an ideal world compared to their older peers who may borrow from concepts of, for example, the environmental movements of the 1960s and 70s. This put my potential interviewees at an age of roughly 35 or younger.

Secondly, I decided to quasi-limit my group of interviewees through a self-imposed goal to achieve a high gender and cultural diversity. The aim of this exploratory research project was to not only discover whether my research questions were relevant and could be solidified into more targeted research endeavors. It also aimed to find out how results might differ in various contexts and how the research design reacted to changing cultural variables. Another positive side effect of this would be that the cultural diversity acted as a control against cultural biases towards the research questions and the design. With only a small qualitative dataset the results would of course still require contrasting against peers from the same cultural group. But establishing this point of control early might already allow for the detection of flaws or point towards variables that would need to be adjusted for, in order for the research to work in different cultural contexts.

I initially searched for my interviewees on the popular discussion platform *reddit.com*, by advertising the research in a post. *Reddit* was founded in 2005 and has grown into one of the globally largest social networks (Clement 2021). It hosts discussions on a multitude of topics, organized into sub-forums, so-called subreddits. The subreddits I advertised the research project in specifically matched people who were looking for interviewees with potential candidates who would reply to the advertisements or publish their own. Potential interviewees were asked to fill out a digital form in which they were asked to roughly outline their utopian vision. The instructions in the form read:

> "In this questionnaire you will be asked to describe your ideal future. In this description please do not build a whole world, but imagine just one tiny patch of it, with you standing in the middle of it. Everything is allowed and possible! Dream big and bold! Absolutely nothing will be checked for achievability!
> Imagine you are suddenly teleported into a utopian future! But not just any part of it - You have been teleported to a spot that you feel particularly strongly about and what you is happening around you makes you feel especially grateful for this new world! Where have you been transported to precisely? Describe your surroundings."

Filling out this form served three purposes: On a practical level, it would allow me to somewhat prepare for the interviews and gain some initial insights into what perspectives my interview partner might have. More importantly, however, it would also allow for the interviewees to start from their vision and then move towards a reflection on the status quo rather than the other way round. As outlined in the previous chapter, this would be crucial to triggering a transformative potential in their imaginations. Finally, the form served as an initial filter prior to the interview. Interviewees who understood the task correctly - meaning they did not, for example, imagine an evidently dystopian vision - and who matched my diversity and age criteria would be sent an invitation to an interview.

While I quickly gathered some initial responses and set up my first interviews, it became apparent that an untargeted approach to the scouting of interviewees on *Reddit* would miss the mark in terms of gender and cultural diversity. Over half of *Reddit*'s user base lives in North America and a large percentage of the rest in Europe or other countries of the Global North (Clement 2021). Some countries, like Indonesia, even censor the platform (Wikipedia). What's more, *Reddit*'s demography would be clearly skewed towards cis-male users (Clement 2021). These trends were strongly represented in the organic responses I was gathering and led me to eventually adjust for this lack of diversity in a more directed way.

Initially, I diversified my potential contact streams and included international *Facebook* groups that were similar to the ones on *Reddit*. When this was met with only little change to my organic responses, I specifically targeted certain groups that would cater to underrepresented regions like Latin America and East Asia. Finally, I also reached out to personal international contacts to ask them to refer me to potential interview candidates in their communities. These approaches finally left me with a group of eight interviewees from five different continents and seven different nations, of which four identified as female, and four as male.

Amanda is an US-American graduate freshman. She is an outspoken education activist, an author and a spoken word poet.

Barron is a college student from California. He invests himself in educating about agriculture and advocating for farmers' rights.

Bradley is a South African Computer Science student and very technologically interested. In his spare time, he writes poetry, does theater, and hosts his own podcast with friends.

Eloa is a Brazilian student for Environmental Management. She is an avid gamer and has spent parts of her life in Japan and Germany.

Esther is a German sustainability graduate and advocate. She just started her first full-time position as a project manager in the public sector.

Jaem is from Lebanon and a recent Engineering and Technology graduate. He writes music in his spare time and raps.

Reyansh is from Bangladesh and has a background in working for the Red Cross and the Bangladeshi government. Today he is interning in a German global development NGO.

Sophie is an Indonesian student for Social and Cultural Anthropology. She is also an education and gender equality activist.

The interviewees were between 17 and 33 years of age at the time of the interviews. Their names have been changed.

3.3 Nature and Structure of the Interviews

All of the interviews were conducted virtually. This was in part due to the ongoing SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that turned in-person contact risky, but mostly because of the widespread geographical distribution of my interview partners. Based on the priorities of my interviewees, I used various different virtual conferencing tools, including Zoom, Skype, Discord, and WhatsApp.

I decided to conduct my interviews without a camera feed. From an ethnographic standpoint it often makes sense to receive as much context to a person's statements as possible. In this case, however, I felt that the visual context would be too limited and controlled for it to be valuable to the research, so I opted for a more neutral approach within which the interviewees would also be able to evoke every image they wanted through the words used and unencumbered by preexisting imagery on their or my end.

In preparation to the interview, I would draft questions based on the utopia they submitted through the survey. These questions usually functioned as devices for my interview partners to elaborate on the existing description in ways that they may haven't had thought of yet. Possible questions included:

- What would you see/hear/smell/taste/feel in the location you imagine yourself being in?
- How would people around you move within the space? What would they do?
- Why would people choose to be or live in the space you imagine?
- Why do people choose to live together / spend time together in the world you imagine?
- Would there be any morals or unspoken rules in your utopia?

Other than a short explanation of the proceedings of the interview and the setting of a date, there were no further discussions of the contents of the interviewees' utopia prior to the interview. At times, the interviewees asked for a copy of their submission through the form to be sent to them in preparation, but other than that they were instructed to come as unprepared as possible.

The interviews began with a short introductory round and small-talk, in order to make the interview partners feel comfortable and to make each other aware of any time restrictions we had or emotional states we were in that might affect the outcome of the interviews. While the interviews proper were relatively unstructured, I aimed to guide the conversation through three stages within each of which the interviewees were free to follow their own train of thought:

In the first stage of the interview, I asked my participants to take a couple minutes to uninterruptedly tell me about the utopia they imagined. Within this part of the conversation, I only intervened or asked questions when my interview partners found it hard to speak without guidance or when I felt that they veered too strongly into reality-checks or a reflection on their utopia, and too little on the description of their imagined space itself. Other than that, the interviewees were invited to mentally me into their utopia as best as possible and be as detailed about their descriptions as they wanted.

I began the second stage of the interview by giving an account of their utopia in my own words in order to confirm that I had understood them correctly. At this stage, my conversation partners would already elaborate on some of the details of their descriptions to clarify or shed additional light on points they made. After these clarifications I would pick up on questions I had prepared or noted down during stage one that would ask about more details of the utopia. These questions did not introduce any new aspects in the utopia, but only referred to points already made by the interviewees in order to explore their utopia more deeply and get a better understanding of recurring themes.

Finally, in the third stage I turned the conversation towards more reflective questions. I would, for instance, ask my interviewees to reflect on their currently lived experience and whether or how it might relate to their utopia. I also asked for biographical background information where it made sense. To conclude the interview, I would ask my interviewees to reflect on the experience of imagining a utopia itself and to give me a short record of their emotions if they felt comfortable doing so. After this, I asked whether my interviewees felt that they wanted to add to anything that we had discussed and closed the interview.

The main purpose of the questions I posed during the interview was to explore which cultural domains the interviewees would explore when encouraged to do so on their own terms. The aimed-for purpose on my end was to both obtain information about the relation of my interviewees' utopias to the SDGs, and to gather information of their personal relationship to their utopias so as to analyze them for indicators of high-level

construal and hope (Schensul and LeCompte 2012, p. 135). As such, the questions I asked during these conversations followed principles for semi-structured interviews and open-ended questioning: While the questions were partly pre-formulated or taken from a set of possible questions, they were asked in a way that allowed my interviewees to answer them in whichever depth or topical direction they would like (Schensul and LeCompte 2012, p. 174). This way, I would avoid imposing my own frames of reference on my interviewees and instead try to understand their world-view and how this is reflected in their utopias (O'Reilly 2013, p. 120). In order to make full use of these effects, it was furthermore necessary to use informal language, in order to encourage an open, direct, and uncensored exchange (ibid., p. 124), and to make enough time for the interviewees to delve into their thoughts as deeply as they wanted (the interviews tended to last between 45 and 120 minutes).

3.4 Data Analysis

I would record my interviews through built-in recording functions and separate recording tools, depending on the platform and the quality of the connection. The recorded interviews were then auto-transcribed through the online tool *Otter.ai*, and subsequently manually corrected and adjusted where needed. The transcripts were kept verbatim, so as to allow for the context of anything that was said to stay documented as best as possible.

The data analysis mixed targeted and open coding: Initially, the interviews were coded openly in order to identify any recurring motives and abstract them into themes. I achieved this by inductively chunking the interview contents into progressively larger and more abstract themes (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, p. 199). These themes would allow me to fill the gaps that the second, more targeted analysis would leave open.

In my analysis, I mixed open and targeted coding: Initially, I coded the interviews openly to identify any recurring motives and abstract them into themes. Afterwards, I analyzed the interviews in a targeted coding approach for the occurrence of any SDGs. I did so by searching for matches between the SDG targets and what the different utopias described or promised. Finally, I used the previously established themes to develop other goals that the interviewees would describe to be crucial to a good life. I analyzed their occurrence alongside the other SDGs.

The targeted coding was informed by a set of indicators: To answer my first research question, "Are issues

of sustainability at all represented in people's visions for an ideal world?", I analyzed the interviews for the occurrence of the Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 targets. This was done so in a relatively lenient way, because the aim was to gain an initial insight into which SDGs would be frequently mentioned, underrepresented, or occur together. As such, the occurrence of utopian elements that align with the SDGs was not analyzed within one interview - quantifying this occurrence would have been difficult to achieve - but *across* them. This would ultimately allow for at least some insight into which SDGs interviewees would intuitively include in their utopias, and which would be more context-specific or underrepresented. At this point, the data won through the inductive and open coding process was drawn from again, in order to complement the findings of the targeted analysis: Regarding the first research question, the open coding analysis allowed to identify goals or desires beyond the Sustainable Development Goals that recurred in the descriptions of the interviewees' utopias. These were added to the analysis around the SDGs and given short descriptions in order to provide a well-rounded analysis of all the recurring elements in the utopias. Regarding the second research question, the inductive analysis results were used in order to provide context around where and in what shape indicators of hope and abstraction would occur. The themes that surrounded occurrences of these indicators then informed a qualitative analysis and thick description of the various intensities and modes of hope and abstraction that could be found. Since the interview participants frequently expressed indicators for hope and abstraction through the syntax of their descriptions, through tonality, and through a pointing towards references much earlier in the interview, these elements were also considered in this addition to the deductive analysis results.

The second part of the targeted coding scanned the interviews for occurrences of high-level abstraction and hope, in order to answer the second research question on the interviewees' relationships to the issues of sustainability. I based this analysis on a list of indicators that are informed by the State Hope Scale (Snyder et al. 1996; Fig 3) and the Construal Level Theory (Krebs and Rapport 2012, Fig 2). Similar to the targeted analysis of the SDGs, the primary aim of this analysis was not to provide a quantitative overview of how "hopeful" or abstract the descriptions of the utopias were. Because open interviews of different lengths and topical focal points would not lend themselves to a quantitative comparison, the main purpose of this analysis was rather to provide a control to the socio-psychological framework outlined in Chapter 2. The idea is not to question said framework, but to check whether moments of transformative potential are present in these interviews, as well - and to qualitatively describe the context in which they appear. This then allows for important insights into whether or not conducting research into the transformative potential of sustainability as a utopian concept would make sense.

3.5 Reflection and Limitations

Throughout this exploratory research process and in reflection on the research design, a few caveats, limitations and potential points of concern came to light, that may need to be addressed in future research or that might skew the results of the findings in the following chapter:

Firstly, it has to be acknowledged that because the research process was inherently exploratory and qualitative, the way the interviews are structured might not lend itself to analyzing indicators of hope or high-level construal in the way it was intended by the existing frameworks. Indicators were never directly checked with the participants (for example by asking "Do you feel a sense of agency after this exercise?"), and as such identifying occurrences of these indicators was largely interpretative. While the research design was consciously set up this way - as a means to analyze how successful the adaptation of social change research in utopias to the field of sustainability would be in the first place - not actively checking for indicators of hope or high-level construal made it at times difficult to determine these states in the interviewees.

This leads to the second, and a more general disclaimer around the translation of the methodology used in this research: Much of the groundwork of the hypotheses that are informing this research is drawn from psychological or at least quantitative research (see Badaan et al.'s Socio-psychological framework, or the Hope State Scale). Even in their fields of origin, these frameworks are under heavy scrutiny and at times criticized. In a 2020 study, for example, Hansen et al. (Hansen et al. 2020) found that Snyder's hope scale displays a significant skew towards positive outcomes among a Tanzanian experiment population (p. 410). To translate these frameworks and their scientific nuance to different fields and research methods will always carry some risk of disregarding their heritage and/or adapting them to a research methodology that they were not initially designed for.

Moving the focus to the actual implementation of the data collection and analysis, we have to acknowledge that even with control mechanisms in place the number of interviewees arguably remains quite small. This is even more true if we take into account that there was no clearly defined geographic or cultural field to explore. This lack of a wider group to abstract from means that some of the findings have to be taken as initial symptoms that have to be further explored rather than as objective truths. For example, as Hansen et al (2020) noted, the idea of "hope" can manifest itself in very different ways across cultures - and depending

on societal and cultural expectations, norms, and traditions a tool like the Hope Scale becomes a lot less quantitatively useful (p. 413).

And while on the one hand this widening of the scope across many geographic and cultural backgrounds creates an issue of comparability, on the other hand, using one language across these backgrounds and cultures - namely English - creates an issue of representation: Since the ideally randomized selection of participants was set up to work through online forums, we have to assume that the organic demographic of my interviewees is skewed towards a technologically quite literate group of people who have access to the internet, who enjoyed, or are still enjoying, a level of education that holds academic potential, and who are vocal and free enough to invest time in non-monetary projects like this one. This fact might render the findings of this research not very representative of larger less economically and socially well-off populations within and outside of the interviewees' cultural groups. Future research will have to address this issue and specifically focus on a more inclusive research design that might bring to light intriguing insights into how utopias are dependent on the values, issues, and hopes of different demographic groups - even within one cultural group.

Finally, I wish to again address the bias that the ethnographic character of this study brings to this research: As described in the first part of this chapter, I am accounting for qualitative research biases in a variety of ways. However, it should also be stated at this point, that an ethnographic interviewing and data analysis approach may yield substantially different results from research conducted on the same questions from a different methodological angle. As an ethnographer, I will often yield control to my research participants, allow for fluidity and flexibility, and make room for tangents, side-notes, and deviants from what I bring to the table (O'Reilly 2013, p. 27). In its best form, this allows for contexts, intimate thoughts, and (ir-)relevancies to come to light that otherwise would remain undiscovered. In its worst form, however, this may mean that the research becomes less focused around the actual research questions, and broad and complex to an extend at which it becomes difficult to abstract into very actionable findings. At this point in the exploration of this field, I want to make room for both the real issue that this caveat brings, but also for the chance to lay open and better grasp the complexity of a new field. It might be up for future research designs to then control and break down this complexity again.

4 Results

4.1 Utopias

Although later sections will show that they depicted recurring themes, the participants' utopias varied widely in terms of their surface description and character. Some descriptions focused on geographically or topically small areas, while others sought to take on a more holistic perspective. Some seemed very urban, fast-paced and complex, and others appeared rather rural, simple and slow-paced:

Esther

Esther, for instance, described a rural eco community with many elements of social cohesion and an ecologically sustainable lifestyle:

> "ideally, it's either a big house or several houses which are close to each other, where you have community rooms, a super big kitchen where you [...] cook together, eat together - and you also have a work room or training room where you can have seminars and do stuff together."

Esther continues to describe a self-sufficient economy that the community would foster through permaculture and community-supported agriculture. However, she then shifts focus towards aspects of community-building in order to explain the social structure she would like to see in her ecovillage:

> "you have to talk about stuff and you need the right tools to do it. Otherwise, resentment will start to grow, maybe hidden hierarchies will form. [...] you have single work groups and then the work groups are still connected. [...] It kind of sounds easy, but in the end it's complicated. But it has so many possibilities."

Esther later expands on these points by describing the benefits that she sees these structures having on the social wellbeing of their residents. She emphasizes new levels of social intimacy and stability, a better sharing of responsibilities, a better appreciation of everyone's preferences, and less performance-driven lifestyles.

Barron

Similar to Esther, Barron described his utopia with very rural features, but instead of one geographically dense community, his vision speaks more of wide spaces and far-spread communities who nonetheless enjoy much of the social intimacy and trust that Esther also talked about:

> "They don't have any fencing or lock their doors, just because everyone trusts each other. The community is very inviting and welcoming. [...] I want communities to be very open, everyone kind of knows everybody."

Barron goes on to describe the role of cities as places that are solely meant to be industrial production sites or places of scientific progress. Social life would be prioritized to happen in the villages and small towns instead. Here, communication would also shift to become more in-person again:

> "Media would be less prevalent. We wouldn't have as much social media and online presence [...]. You go to the town square and you talk to people and you have vocal communication. [...] It would be a lot more just seeing people in real life, if possible."

Barron imagines these rural landscapes to be largely uninterrupted by modern infrastructure. He describes, for instance, an underground transportation system that would leave more space on the surface for agriculture, the aforementioned communities, and untouched environment:

> "We would have vehicles on the surface level just for the transportation of goods or moving certain commodities from place to place that we couldn't do from underground systems. But for large distance travel, we would use underground systems."

Finally, Barron describes changes to the way we educate and to political structures: In terms of education, he imagines a mixture of what he calls Socratic seminars, where learning would happen largely through debate, and high-technology teaching through tools like VR. In terms of politics, his ideal world would see a getting rid of the party system in favor of a focus on the ideas of individuals and the attractiveness of those ideas. The most powerful ideas would then be the most intelligent and widely appreciated ones.

Sophie

Continuing with the theme of focusing one's utopia on education and politics, Sophie's ideal world continued to hone in on these two elements even more strongly. Being an Indonesian education activist, she put access to education front and center in her utopia:

"I live in a rural village area, so people here don't have access to education. [...] especially for [young] women, they don't have a big access to education and the family also supports them to get married as soon as possible."

In her mind, a utopia where these educational meets are met is a world where these marginalized communities and social groups also experience more political and economic power. Her ideal education scenario also involves a breaking down of the barriers between rural Indonesian areas and the globalizing world through language exchanges and increasingly wide-spread knowledge of English among marginalized people. She believes that with this knowledge, people will be better equipped to understand their situation in the larger scheme of things and become active politically in order to exercise their rights. Politically, then, she describes her utopia to be one of political literacy, where decisions can be challenged through the people that affect them most, instead of politicians focusing on increasing their financial gains:

"with education we can get a lot of information [...]. So there will be [...] an actions movement that's coming from the underprivileged."

Amanda

Amanda's vision for an ideal world is born out of a political motivation of similar timeliness. Coincidentally, we had scheduled our interview not only in the middle of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, but only days after the killing of George Floyd as a result of police brutality. Amanda is a young American woman of color herself and the utopia she described included many ideas of intra-national peace and social trust:

In her utopia, she imagines a more futuristic and socially relaxed version of Philadelphia's city center. She speaks of music and dancers on the streets, artists who create paintings or poems, and people connecting through in-person conversation or holographic devices. What's more, she describes people as being able to be physically very close to each other.

"something particular to the time that we're living in right now is people being able to speak to people they don't know. Instead of there being six feet apart of distance, everybody's really close [...]. And people are constantly switching conversations."

Reflecting on it, Amanda describes this form of social trust as being built on a mutual understanding of collective responsibility and an overall sense of being focused on opportunity and community rather than fear.

> "people are sharing stories about their childhoods and about their hopes and dreams [...] And they're trying to figure out how we can all have this really fun, collective experience."

Artist's rendition of Amanda's utopia (Source: author)

Jaem

Jaem's approach to dealing with different social mentalities differed from Amanda's in a couple of ways. Firstly, he focused his utopia on the differences between extroverted and introverted individuals and their varying needs. And secondly, he resolved this tension through a vision of a binary living environment:

> "it always boils down to extroverts and introverts [...]. And so I felt like the utopia I would imagine would have accommodation for both these kind of sets of people - with one side of the city having skyscrapers where everything is close and everything is noisy and loud, because that's how some people like it, and then the other, you know, more separated [...] maybe country feeling houses where people can have their own space and own bubble."

Jaem later expands on this idea by describing how neither side would have any technological advantages or other privileges, but how the whole point of the two sides would be to allow people to live in their ideal social environments. The two sides would be easily accessible to either group of people and may be

sectioned off from one another by parks or gardens. People would then walk through these natural landscapes to transition from one side to the other.

Adding to this idea of met social preferences, Jaem also describes his utopia as a place of free artistic expression:

> "[Art] becomes more of a norm. Not because of this utopia pushing people towards the stage. It's because everyone by nature and everyone I've known has some sort of creative output, but they just don't put it out to the world."

Again, Jaem connects this lack of open creative expression to a lack of societal structures to support this kind of artistic work. Consequentially, his utopia sees no discrimination between artistic careers and, for instance, technology-focused professional pathways. Jaem emphasizes the freedom of choice everyone should have to pursue their calling regardless of economic factors or social stigma:

> "I really look forward to people being able to pick what they want, because a lot of people throughout history that have invented some of the most important building blocks of society have been people that went with what they liked"

Artist's rendition of Jaem's utopia (Source: author)

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Creativity and its potential new role in an ideal world also featured prominently in Bradley's utopia, and similar to Jaem, he put a strong focus on professional self-expression. In his utopia, humanity would have automated everything that would have previously demanded human labor, so their focus could shift to more innovative tasks:

> "It will become a much more creative world because it's things like science that would skyrocket because those would be the only applicable fields"

For Bradley, this progress would feed into a still ongoing technological advancement of humanity that would have already birthed heads-up displays, teleportation technology and walk-through walls. However, Bradley describes his vision of an ideal world as "very techno-organic" and depicts technological inventions as existing synergistically with natural environment: There are solar panels, electric vehicles, self-sufficient heating systems, and full control over the technologies people would use:

> "Everybody will have a sort of heads-up display [...] and it tells you information about the world around you, but you can dismiss it if you want to just admire the world."

Similarly, Bradley's utopia does not include large buildings or infrastructures, but walkable neighborhoods, no air or light pollution and untouched nature. He imagines people only using what they would need, and building more of a utilitarian relationship with technology. In his ideal world, humans would focus on self-realization and contributing to society:

> "there would be much more focus on the self, on you, on what you want, what you need, what you can give and get from society as a person. And every person would have their value because every person has something to offer."

Artist's rendition of Bradley's utopia.(Source: author)

Reyansh

This negotiation of the relationship between human needs and the technological possibilities was also part of Reyansh's utopia, although he answered this question quite differently. In his utopia, humans' exposure to technology has evolved them to have bigger brains, bigger eyes and show no signs of aging. They do not need to eat anything but just swallow a tablet to have the nutrition they require. Similar to Bradley's utopia, Reyansh describes technology to have solved global issues like hunger, poverty, crime, or pollution, but he pictures his utopia as a very urban place:

> "like a picture of a sci-fi movie: Tall buildings with electronic cars [...] that are flying. [...] there will be no sign of rural or villages anymore"

Reyansh's utopia also seems faster and more interconnected compared to today's world:

> "Everything is within our hands. There is a free flow of news and everything. [...] there is no border or geographical boundaries or religious boundaries."

In his utopia, this free and global exchange of information and culture will have led to a loss of national and religious identity. People would not need to worship a god or be citizens of any nation states. There would be more migration for those who want it, but people would generally live where they were born, because they would not need to move homes for economic, social or security benefits anymore. Similarly, Reyansh's utopia would not see any social hierarchy anymore. Everyone would get the needs they have met.

When asked about what people will spend their time on, Reyansh, like Bradley, points to science and technology:

> "inventing new services for human beings, or new instruments, new machines, or something like that. Or maybe in one-, two-, three-hundred years, our main occupation would be to find new lands in the universe, like on Mars or the other planets."

Eloa

Finally, in her utopia, Eloa attempts to find a synergistic solution to the relationship between human advancement, and the natural environment. She imagines a bridging of abandoned natural areas and overcrowded urban places: Her cities would have more wild animals and vegetation, whereas less urban areas would be better connected to these centers through public transport and would see a better rural infrastructure.

> "I would like something more homogeneous, like a kind of more merged environment. [...] if we could just mix the two so that urban areas are not as gray and compact, and the rural areas are not as abandoned - that would be my ideal world."

Eloa's utopia would also see a change of materials used: Instead of using concrete, buildings would be built with wood or another suitable material, that would allow for plants to grow on top of these constructions and a better rainwater management. Cars would be able to silently hover above ground and trains could cross oceans. And while people would still commute by foot or bicycle, these new forms of transportation would allow for sustainable travel and a better connection of the urban and rural.

> "maybe you could go on a weekend trip, like across the Atlantic? Or at least to Norway or something across the water?"

Finally, Eloa also imagines her ideal world to be free of corruption and led by a political system that fosters trust in politicians and civilized discourse between different parties. However, instead of a homogeneous political landscape, there would still be different positions:

> "even in a perfect world, you can't have everyone agree with everyone, because then that would just be boring."

This final statement seems to offer a good summary of the large variance of utopias this chapter has described. However, we have also seen first parallels and recurring themes between the different utopias.

Using the Sustainable Development Goals, we may attempt to gain a better understanding of how the utopias differed from each other thematically, which goals for sustainability they may have tended to instinctively integrate, and which they omitted.

4.2 SDGs in Utopian Vision-Making

A coding of the interviews revealed that between the eight interviewees all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals were included in their utopias. The SDGs were not, however, represented in equal frequency: While candidates like SDG 11: "Sustainable cities and communities" or SDG 16: "Peace, justice, and strong institutions" were included in one form or another in almost all utopian visions, other goals were less frequent. SDG 5: "Gender equality" and SDG 14: "Life below water" were mentioned only once between all of the interviewees' utopias. On average, any SDG would have been mentioned 3.7 times within the 8 interviews, but with the large variance in numbers of mentions, no number of occurrences stood out as particularly representative.

It seems important to mention that none of the interviewees specifically mentioned SDGs by their name. Instead, the coding had to draw from the SDGs' targets to connect them to aspects of the individual visions. For example, Eloa's mention of green buildings with better rainwater catchment systems connects to target 9.4 "[...] upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable [...]". Similarly, in Barron's utopia the aspect of using VR to make learning content more accessible connects to target 4.a "Build and upgrade education facilities [...]".
This also means that while all SDGs were represented in some form or another, not all of the targets might have been addressed by the interviewees in their utopias. And while some SDGs may have enjoyed a relatively high representation, the specific target(s) that were mentioned might have varied.

	1 No Poverty	2 Zero Hunger	3 Good Health and Well-Being	4 Quality Education	5 Gender Equality	6 Clean Water and Sanitation	7 Affordable and Clean Energy	8 Decent Work and Economic Growth	9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	10 Reduced Inequalities	11 Sustainable Cities and Communities	12 Responsible Consumption and Production	13 Climate Action	14 Life Below Water	15 Life on Land	16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	17 Partnerships for the Goals	
AMANDA (US)				•		•		•	•	•	•		•			•		8
BARRON (US)		•		•				•	•		•	•			•	•	•	9
BRADLEY (ZA)	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			13
ELOA (BRA)									•		•				•	•		4
ESTHER (GER)			•								•	•			•	•		5
JAEM (LEB)								•		•	•			•	•	•		6
REYANSH (BAN)	•	•	•				•	•	•	•		•				•	•	10
SOPHIE (INDO)				•	•			•			•	•	•			•	•	8
	2	3	3	4	1	2	2	6	5	4	7	5	3	1	5	7	3	

Figure 4: Analysis of SDGs occurrence (Source: author)

Looking at the data from the other side of the table, variance was, again, fairly high: While utopias like Eloa's or Esther's included only four or five SDGs respectively, others trended more towards anything between eight and ten. Bradley even included thirteen SDGs in one form or another into his utopia. There seems to be no direct correlation between the number of SDGs covered and the length of the interview - with the exception of Bradley who had both the largest number of SDGs and the longest interview. Otherwise, there seems to be no connection. The mean for SDGs mentioned in an interview lies at 7.9.

After an inductive analysis of the interviews, other goal-related themes were identified. These themes in the interviewees' utopias were not addressed by the SDGs and thus consolidated into four additional goals. These four goals were phrased and framed in a manner similar to the SDGs, and added to the analysis for evaluation.

The four supplementary goals (in the following called SPGs) are outlined in the following.

Freedom of expression, self-realization, and experience: Ensure equal opportunity for all and remove economic and social barriers for every person to realize their full potential.

Artist rendition of SPG 1 (Source: Author)

Social abundance, intimacy, and trust: Build emotionally resilient communities and a culture of mutual trust and transparency.

Artist rendition of SPG 2 (Source: Author)

Pushing the boundaries of technology and human life: Create breakthrough innovations that fundamentally change the human experience.

Artist rendition of SPG 3 (Source: Author)

Reduced complexity: Promote a societal appreciation for simplicity, sufficiency, and slow-paced life.

Artist rendition of SPG 4 (Source: Author)

In analyzing the goals, it may be observed that, again, all of the SPGs were fairly well represented with no clear outliers. On the other side of the analysis, every interviewee made mention of at least one of the SPGs in their respective utopia - with Eloa mentioning only SPG *3, and Esther including all four of them. In Esther's case, the amount of SPGs is also fairly high when put in relation to the amount of SDGs that were present in her utopia. This is less true for Amanda, Bradley, Eloa, and Sophie for whom the SPGs constituted only one fifth or less of the total goals in their utopias.

	SDGs	1 FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, SELF-REALIZATION, AND EXPERIENCE	2 SOCIAL ABUNDANCE, INTIMACY, AND TRUST	3 PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY AND HUMAN LIFE	4 REDUCED COMPLEXITY AND APPRECIATION FOR SIMPLICITY	
AMANDA (US)	8	●	●			10
BARRON (US)	9	●	●		●	12
BRADLEY (ZA)	13	●		●	●	16
ELOA (BRA)	4			●		5
ESTHER (GER)	5	●	●	●	●	9
JAEM (LEB)	6	●	●	●		9
REYANSH (BAN)	10		●	●	●	13
SOPHIE (INDO)	8	●	●			10
		6	6	5	4	

Figure 5: Analysis of SDGs + SPGs occurrence (Source: author)

4.3 Construal Levels and Hope

The targeted analysis according to the State Hope Scale and the indicators for high-level construal did not yield any clear-cut results. However, in terms of understanding the relationship between hope and high-level construal, the analysis still revealed certain tendencies.

Firstly, while construal levels throughout utopias were often mixed, a fair portion of utopias depicted a visible trend towards low construal levels. Bradley's imaginary world, for instance, is filled with relatively

concrete technologies designed around the solving of issues that he cares about or that affect him personally, revealing a low social distance. Similarly, Sophie's utopia revolves around the issues of her community and peers and the solutions to these issues have already been decided on. Adding to that, she also focuses quite intensely on the complexities around the issues she is trying to solve, and her utopia seems temporally and hypothetically very close.

This is also true for Esther whose utopia seems not very temporally distant - as in that most aspects of it could be implemented already today. The elements that do seem temporally distant are discussed carefully and the nuances that may surround them considered thoroughly. Thus, with increasing temporal distance there also seems to be a stronger consideration of how to realize solutions.

Finally, Eloa's utopia is framed in a similar careful manner, and although temporally more distant, she, too, frequently acknowledges the complexity behind her imaginary designs. Her ideas are often related back to personal experiences and more ambitious elements supported through best-practice examples that she knows about.

On the side of hope, we can see a partial tendency towards the reverse: A significant portion of the interviews depict high levels of hope while for the rest hope levels remain situational or unclear. And while there is some overlap between this finding and the previous regarding low-level construal, there does not seem to be an unambiguous correlation.

Amanda's utopia, for instance, depicts both elements of high- and low-level construal. At the same time, she frames her utopia in an optimistic and pathway-aligning way and sees herself as an active participant in the creation of this utopia with a certain amount of agency and power.

This expression of agency is also true - albeit in different manners - for Sophie's and Bradley's utopias: Sophie positions herself as the central actress for change inside her utopia. Bradley, on the other hand, acknowledges that he and everyone else, might only be small contributors to a better world, but argues that these contributions are nonetheless crucial to the success of positive progress.

Jaem shares this mentality somewhat when he posits that everyone may achieve happiness if they stay true to their calling - and that people who do so will contribute to society in meaningful ways. The perceived troubleshooting competency and solution abundance in these statements are clear indicators of high hope levels.

We therefore not only see that there is no clear trend towards high or low levels of hope and construal. We can also make out that what hope and a higher- or lower-level construal means can be highly dependent on the vision and its visionary. The attempt in this chapter is therefore to analyze these constellations in more depth in order to better understand these mixed results.

Hope levels may be, among others, measured by analyzing the perceived solution abundance expressed by the interviewees. Barron, Eloa, and Reyansh all showed indications of this high perceived solution abundance. However, in each of these interviews, the interviewees tended to connect these expressions of there being many possible solutions to problems with a check for feasibility.

Concretely, this meant that after proposing one or more solutions or innovations, the interviewees would - without solicitation - ponder the caveats of the solution or the potential barriers on the way to realizing an innovation. These instances occurred, even though checking for feasibility was explicitly mentioned as not necessary ahead of every interview.

This apprehension of discussing ideas without also considering their potential caveats may not only indicate a self-induced cap to one's level of hope, but also again a trend towards low-level construal, as this strategy pulls the solutions and innovations back into the concrete and hypothetically close.

This tendency towards low-level construal also becomes evident in utopias that stay relatively close to reality or within the realm of immediate possibilities: Esther, for instance, imagined her utopia to be a relatively simple eco-community and thus chose something that could not only be achieved in a relatively near-term time frame, but that she already holds much of the means to achieve herself to. Sophie, too, imagined a utopia that geographically and potentially temporally stayed relatively close. Just like Esther's, her utopia did not imagine any major geo-societal shifts, or novel innovations, but rather a betterment of a relatively concrete problem.

Solution abundance and pathway alignment also experienced another handicap in a few of the utopias: Bradley, Amanda and Reyansh all expressed a high perceived solution abundance and/or a high perceived pathway alignment. However, these expressions are at some point during the interview supplemented with the bittersweet caveat that they might not see their utopia realized in their lifetime. Similar to the previously discussed feasibility checks, these expressions lower the construal level of the utopia, because they bring the imagined solutions closer on the hypothetical and temporal distance scale. Different to the previous examples, however, they arguably do not restrict the expression of hope. However, an example where this does happen can be found in Barron's description of his utopia. There, he displays levels of low agency, expressed through a perceived low ability to influence his environment:

> "I'd be curious to see if that would actually come into realization, which I don't think it could anymore. I don't think that's quite honestly possible anymore."

This mixture of at times high-level construal, but low level of agency leaves his utopia to be fatalistic or at least escapist in parts.

Another interesting combination of indicators can be found in Jaem's utopia: His is arguably one of the utopias with the highest level of social distance, as he rarely speaks of himself inside the utopia, but rather imagines himself in other people's shoes. Meanwhile, other construal indicators stay relatively low - his utopia being fairly concrete and focused on the means for realization. This composition led his social distance to feel at times somewhat presumptuous. Overall, his utopia then reminded, on occasion, of a relatively blueprint idea of an ideal world with comparably little room for other versions[6].

Blueprint or not, most of the interviewees included elements of low system justification into their utopias. The only exception to this rule might be found in Reyansh's descriptions. He seemed to embrace the idea that the world he was imagining was a consequence of systemic trends he could already witness. In Barron's and Sophie's utopia, on the other hand, their low system justification would be translated particularly directly into the description of the utopia. As a result, the utopias are often framed as antitheses or solved states of problems they see with their current situation. This becomes evident, for instance, when the descriptions are explicitly formulated as negations of the flawed status quo:

> "Basically, I was looking for a way to replace the current road system."
> – Barron

> "the women here can have an access [to education] and to preventing child marriage."
> – Sophie

Their utopias thus seem to lean heavily on what Levitas would call the function of critique.

Other interviewees, like Esther and Eloa, would follow a different narrative and at times focus on best-practices to better explain elements of their utopia or outline pathways to realization of the utopia. In her interview, Esther would, for example, speak about alternative political and economic models that she perceives as beneficial to her utopia, or name examples of places or people who already depict elements of her ideal world. Eloa, too, references a suburb in the Netherlands that she perceives to be a best-practice example of the way urban planning should work in her utopia.

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[6] However, I wish to stress that this constitutes a personal perception and might also, for example, be interpreted as his personal microcosmic preference - similar to Esther's and Bradley's utopia.

In both cases, these side tracks of speaking about best practices coincide with expressions of hope which might allow us to assume a correlation here. If true, the speaking about best practice examples could therefore be considered triggers for hope in utopian imaginaries.

There are two final findings that might be worth noting:

Firstly, we may observe that many interviewees - sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly - disregard the notion that their utopia needs to be a world free of issues, disagreements or flaws. Instead, interviewees like Bradley and Eloa even explicitly state that they would not want to live in a world free of struggle. This differs from the previous notion of checking of feasibility or not imagining utopias quite so boldly, as the interviewees frame this as an integrally positive attribute of their ideal world:

> "I specifically said that teleporters are used for long distance travel. So you didn't have to sit in a car or a plane for eight hours. But I don't want to be teleported to my grocery store. […] I walk to the grocery store whenever I buy groceries and that's such a nice thing"
> – Bradley

Secondly, many of the interviews recorded a moment or more of expressive gratitude from the interviewees' side. This gratitude was mostly directed towards the opportunities they experience, their privilege, or even the interview itself. It remains unclear how to read this finding. On the one hand, this could be understood to be another expression of pathway alignment and therefore an indication of hope.

However, since these expressions were most frequent in the later parts of the interview as part of reflective conversations on the utopia and the interview itself, they might also be independent conversational elements that do not connect to the imaginary. Ultimately, this late position in the interview may also mean that gratitude spawns as a result of the utopian exercise as a whole. To determine the role of gratitude in this or any enterprise, further research may need to be done.

5 Discussion

5.1 The Position of the SDGs in Young People's Utopias

Answering the first research question,

> "Are issues of sustainability at all represented in people's visions for an ideal world? If yes,
> is there a certain priority given to any of them?",

we may summarize that the Sustainable Development Goals do seem to find a place in young people's utopias. Although this is not equally true for all 17 SDGs, the coverage seems to be broad enough, and between eight utopias, no SDGs was left unmentioned. However, it does offer interesting insights to see how in this selection of interviewees, goals like "Gender equality", "Affordable and clean energy", or "Climate action" did not become the runaway leaders one might expect them to be: Given the current political debates and societal trends, one would expect goals like these to rank higher, if the utopias were direct responses to contemporary issues. Instead, SDGs like "Decent work and economic growth" or "Sustainable cities and communities" have been dominant in the utopias discussed here. Considering the sample size, it may be too early to draw any final conclusions, but this may indicate that utopian imaginaries are more useful to the discussion of some Sustainable Development Goals, or even perhaps specific targets, than others.

The wide variance of SDG occurrence in utopias furthermore indicates a deep relationship between the individuals' personal biographic backgrounds and the SDGs they focus on. What's more, there still is the possibility to be explored that cultural background might connect with utopias. For the moment, there was little difference to be found between interviewees' imaginaries from the global north compared to those from the global south. This may, however, change, once the selection of interviewees is adjusted for economic and social status (Milkoreit 2017, p. 10). Similarly, political orientation may influence individuals' utopias and their focus on certain SDGs. Badaan et al. (2020) suggested that while some elements will likely stay the same across utopias, others may vary according to political stance (p. 8).

Finally, it is worth pointing out again, that the SDGs - while present implicitly through their targets that

connected to elements in people's utopias - were never *explicitly* mentioned in the interviews. Even with parallels drawn between individual SDG targets and the interviewees' imaginaries, we may need to consider the possibility that these parallels are not a result of a symbiotic relationship between the participants utopias and the SDGs. Instead, the connections may be a result of the inherent nature of the compared indicators: A large number of possible targets meeting at times very broadly phrased desires will yield at least some connections. The lack of explicitly mentioned SDGs suggests that they are actually not perceived as a utopian tool by the interviewees.

This hypothesis is further strengthened by the significant weight given to goals that would not fall within the framework of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Within the eight interviews, four such goals have been identified and named: "Freedom of expression, self-realization, and experience", "Social abundance, intimacy, and trust", "Pushing the boundaries of technology and human life", and "Reduced complexity". These goals reflect how utopias seem to be more than the sum of the SDGs that are present within them. For the interviewees, their utopias extended beyond the boundaries of geopolitical guidelines. They instead included desires of personal freedom, of being physically and emotionally close to peers, friends and family, of adventure and challenge, and of enjoying simplicity.

Considering that all interviewers also included at least one of these goals into their desired ideal worlds, we may draw the conclusion that they, too, will need to be considered to a collective dialog around what world we wish to live in. SDGs alone do not seem to capture every aspect every aspect that would make a world ideal in young people's minds. The relationship between these individuals and the SDGs thus is an incomplete one.

Here, again, next steps could mean confirming these findings with stakeholders from less advantageous backgrounds. The supplementary goals that they feel strongly about, might differ considerably from the ones documented in this research. And while the generation interviewed for this project will certainly be the most influential one for the upcoming years, comparing findings across generations may reveal interesting results about lessons to be learned from older generations or trends to consider for the people to come.

5.2 The Transformative Potential of Utopias

The results of this research have revealed that there seems to be a slight tendency towards low levels of construal and high levels of hope in the imaginaries of the interviewees. We have identified a few trends such as a general trend to check for feasibility within the imaginaries, or certain triggers for hope and high-level construal. These triggers and trends allow for some indication on how the second research question,

> "How do people evaluate their relationships to issues of sustainability when they are addressed in the context of imagining and negotiating utopias?",

may be answered:

The interviewees in this research often seemed to oscillate between utopias of compensation and utopias of critique - with some leaning more into one or the other direction. Their relationship towards the imagined world and the sustainability issues they chose to include was therefore one of escapism and frustration, respectively. In many - perhaps most - cases we have seen these two framings to appear within the same interview and at times relatively close to each other. The interviewees seemed torn between the idea of their imaginary being a recreational exercise and the desire to use it for addressing issues that they would like to see solved.

The expression of this conflict took on different forms: From "fact-checking" one's own vision, to adopting and discussing examples of real-world best-practices, all the way to voicing fatalistic emotions at the prospect of their utopia not becoming reality. Especially that last example seems to point towards a certain frustrated inability to bridge the original tension of utopias - that is the gap between their utopia being an ideal world and a world that does not exist outside their minds.

We did, however, also see moments of change, albeit not as prominently: When asked to reflect on the exercise, many interviewees would express that it did spark thought processes that they had not experienced before. Others would voice a new-found appreciation for things they took for granted, or a motivation to think more deeply about what an ideal world means for them. These moments indicate that utopias may facilitate a relationship of curiosity, empathy, and motivation towards issues of sustainability. We have also found that the imagined utopias did, at least in part, spark desire among the interviewees. This desire may have been at times in conflict with a feeling of unfeasibility. But at the very least almost all interviewees did express a distinct desire for their utopia to become a reality. Considering our

understanding of utopias as productive expressions of desire, we may celebrate these as at least some evidence to the success of these utopian imaginaries.

Beyond these findings, however, the transformative potential of utopias in terms of achieving sustainability goals still remains unclear. Even though the research allowed to discern a few patterns, occurrences of indicators for hope and high-level construal have still been diverse and individual across interviewees' responses.

We may take this to mean that, for example, imagining utopias has no significant advantage over a stylistically random conversation or discussion. However, it seems equally possible that the research design may yet have to be developed to represent the actual emotions and motivations of the interviewees. This leaves us with three possible interpretations to our research results:

The most immediate assumption may be that there must be a certain inherent impossibility to marry hope and high-level construal in utopian thinking. The findings of this research would then point towards the two paths of Badaan et al.'s framework to be mutually exclusive. This would indicate that from a practical perspective, one would need to address either one or the other for transformative change to come about. It would also mean that this research design is more suited to the path of hope than the path of higher-level construal. However, since the relationship between hope and high-level construal itself seems to still be relatively unexplored, a closer look at this intersection might provide crucial insights into how they can successfully coexist in utopian imaginaries.

The second assumption may be that the ethnographic research design that was used may have not facilitated an effective use of the socio-psychological framework in the first place. Retrospectively, it is noteworthy how little the participants expressively voiced feelings of agency or pathway alignment on their own. The aim of the open interview framework was to yield as much directional power to the participants as possible - in order to gain an unbiased insight into what themes and emotions would naturally occur. The interviews have shown, however, that these moments of expressing indicators for hope would often not occur unless specifically asked for. Future research designs might therefore wish to include a longer and more explicit reflective part in the utopian exercises, with a stronger set of questions and better comparability across different interviews.

With regards to construal levels, the research design might have emphasized the personal nature of the utopia a little too much. In my questions and my moderation of the interview, I had continuously emphasized the personal level and encouraged my interviewees to speak about details wherever possible. The idea behind this approach was to strengthen the emotional bond interviewees might have to their ideal worlds, to better make out differences between the various utopias, and to avoid blueprint utopias where

possible. Retrospectively, these concerns seem to have been mostly unfounded and might have hindered the utopias to unfold their full potential with respect to higher-level construal.

Both of these potential caveats speak to the importance of a careful research design in the using of utopias for uncovering people's relationships to specific issues.

The final possible reason for mixed results in construal levels and hope could be that utopias in themselves do not suffice to uncover these findings, but need a larger framework they are embedded in. In their research on futuristic imaginaries in educational contexts, Reif (2017) found that "futuristic imaginaries by themselves are not transformative, but a purposeful and creative starting point for transformation." (p. 14, author's translation). The same might be true for utopias in this context: They might require embedding in a larger research or practice framework for the spark they create to be properly caught and made use of. Figuring out what these frameworks could look like might be an opportunity for future research in itself.

Understanding which, if any, of the above reasons may apply, will be crucial, not only for the success of future research, but also for eliminating the risks that come with using utopias as a tool. The interviewees' utopias showed only few indications of being blueprints or oppressive in any other form. Some interviewees even voiced a curiosity for hearing other people's utopias after their exercise. Nonetheless, the carefulness with which the interviewees built and explained their imaginaries speaks to the fragile and uncertain relationship young adults still have with this mode of thinking. Much of this uncertainty is of course justified because of the past abuse of utopias for totalitarian purposes. Science may serve as a place to re-develop a healthy relationship with utopias, but needs to make certain to allow for the door to public engagement to remain open, so as to avoid becoming an imposing force itself (Meyer 2017, p. 66).

Given that this precondition is met, utopias or other forms of collective imaginaries will remain important variables to track. From a sociological perspective, they provide a crucial counterpart to the analysis of "what is" by exploring "what could be" in optimistic and hopeful ways (Morgan 2016, p. 13). However, their holistic nature allows utopias to be meaningful tools in other academic and non-academic contexts, too. Levitas (2013) posits that "its explicitly hypothetical character enables us to insist on utopia's provisionality, reflexivity and dialogic mode" (p. xviii). This allows utopias to not only be a relatively unique tool in research, but also for them to function as enablers for transdisciplinarity and modes for democratic debate in and outside of science.

Ultimately, the imagining of better futures have proven and will prove to be fundamental to the dealing with the rapid and far-reaching global changes that we are experiencing in the 21st century: They have the

ability to guide group decision-making, function as social adhesive, and to fuel social well-being (Milkoreit 2017, p. 1). These benefits will be felt both in times of perpetual uncertainty, and in moments of deep crisis when the stories that we tell ourselves about our futures are not true anymore.

Creating this form of resilience will mean for society to be more used to these imaginary exercises - something that the findings show we seem to have become a little unaccustomed to. And to expand the range of our imaginary capabilities might mean to create more such utopian exercises where we are challenged to think about or be part of novel experiences (ibid., p. 5).

5.3 Outlook on the Relationship between Sustainability and Utopias

The starting assumption of this research was that a utopian understanding of sustainability could still be productive because utopias can be. This is in line with previous research that indicates a synergetic relationship between so-called "green utopias" and the perceived potential and motivation to elicit change (Fernando et al. 2020, p. 9). The socio-psychological model that was used in the present research attempted to outline how this relationship might function causally.

Throughout the analysis of our interviews, it became apparent that this model seems to at least be reliant on a specific understanding of utopias. Consequentially, the research design would also need to be very specific to this understanding of utopias. Adding to that, it seems that there is still work to be done to better understand how to include issues of sustainability into this kind of imaginary-based research. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals have been likely candidates, because of their somewhat visionary nature. This study has found, however, that in order to effectively and comparatively address them, the research design might need to be altered.

The discussion in the previous section on potential caveats to the transformative potential of utopias has also revealed that these exercises might need to be embedded in larger frameworks to begin with. This is echoed by scholars like Milkoreit (2017) who calls for an exploration of imaginaries and future-thinking "outside of the constraints of participatory sustainability research projects" (p. 6).

Considering my somewhat homogeneously academic (or at least academically inclined) selection of interviewees, this appeal resonates with my previously voiced suggestion to diversify the participants for this research design to elicit a more representative set of responses. Beyond a mere diversification of research participants, however, it appears that the imagining of utopias needs to become a larger democratic

process that transcends backgrounds and abilities. Perhaps only then it may unfold its true potential and do justice to the complexity of contemporary sustainability issues.

6 Conclusion

One of the most immediate findings in the analysis of this research was that no one participant was able to include all SDGs in their utopia. On the other hand, a small group of just eight individuals completely covered all SDGs relatively easily. Perhaps this insight may serve as a metaphor for how we will need to establish a stronger democratic dialog, in order to establish more holistic visions for the world we want to live in. This dialog needs to transcend borders, societal status, economic background, genders, and abilities. We seem to still have a long way to go to bring this dialog to life and to establish a mode of moderating this dialog so as to make use of its transformative potential. Rutger Bregman (2019) observes:

> "most people in wealthy countries believe children will actually be worse off than their parents. But the real crisis of our times, of my generation, is not that we don't have it good, or even that we might be worse off later on. No, the real crisis is that we can't come up with anything better." (p. 19)

The real issue does not seem to be that we are rightfully scared what the future might bring, but that - maybe because of a lack of external pressure - we are not intuitively imagining a better future anymore. Instead, the future we are imagining is filled with worst-case scenarios of worldwide pandemics, a devastating climate crisis, and invasive technology. This is an issue insofar as these imaginations do in fact shape social, political and scientific agendas (Reinsborugh 2017, p. 6). And excluding the good, the utopian, from this agenda-setting may deprive us of a chance to actively work towards these positive visions - and feel excited doing so.

To get there, further research will need to be done: Firstly, the relationship between hope and construal-levels still remains uncertain and a better understanding of this relationship will provide valuable insights into the effective usage of Badaan et al.'s framework.

Secondly, the marriage of utopias and sustainability has seen promising results in this research but needs to be better understood as well. This might require further trials with other sustainability-related indicators and/or a stronger theoretical analysis of the two concepts and their relation to one another. Thirdly, these better understandings should lead us to a more reliable research design. Results of a stronger research design should then become more replicable, comparable, and scalable to larger participant groups. Fourthly - and finally - further research needs to be done into how to integrate the resulting research design

into larger schemes that do not only facilitate research findings, but initiate larger discourses and a democratic dialog on the futures we want to work towards. This may not only require a better idea of the transformative potential of utopias and how it interacts with other transformational activities, but also a deeper understanding of the formative processes and effects of utopias themselves (Milkoreit 2017, p. 6; Fernando et al. 2018, p. 11).

To close, I would like to suggest that we should be using utopias as a tool for research across domains more often. The results of this research indicate that the findings imaginaries can provide about the motivations, biographic backgrounds and future-oriented desires of people are quite profound. This depth is especially remarkable for fields one would otherwise need a substantial amount of time to build the necessary trust in. Utopias have the potential to be playful and non-invasive, but still allow for deep insights into people's desires, hopes and stories. At the same time, they allow for much of the user agency participant-centered research is looking for. Research participants get to weave their own stories and make clear where they wish to put emphases without leaving the overall framework of the research questions. Within an anthropological research context, this kind of research design would allow for significant findings around what constitutes and promotes wellbeing in communities and societal structures (Fischer 2014, p. 216). In a science engagement context, utopias can serve as valuable tool to understand and discuss the way we wish to translate findings into actionable causes or policies (Fischer 2019). In my ideal world, utopia would then no longer mean an outrageously unlikely or dangerous fantasy that need to be dismissed. Instead, it would mean a hopeful drive towards a better tomorrow that is practiced regularly and consciously.

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Declaration

Herewith, I declare that this thesis has been completed independently and unaided and that no other sources other than the ones given here have been used.

Furthermore, I declare that this work has never been submitted at any other time or anywhere else as a final thesis.

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3 October 2021