The role of narratives of care in sustainability

by

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Author’s Declaration

This thesis consists of material all of which I authored or co-authored: see Statement of Contributions included in the thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Statement of contributions

In chapter 1, Laura Blanco-Murcia was responsible for conceptualization, methodology design, investigation, formal analysis, writing of the original draft, and writing of the final draft. Juan Moreno-Cruz was responsible for conceptualization, reviewing and editing, and supervision.

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Abstract

Current dominant narratives about human nature - those that portray humanity as inherently self-centered, extractive, and utilitarian - are incomplete and insufficient to foster transformations towards sustainable scenarios. Since these prioritize transactions and an extractive interaction with the human and more than-human-world, they are instead accelerating environmental degradation and deepening social inequalities. Narratives of care emerge as powerful counter-narratives, by providing holistic, relational, and inclusive solutions. Narratives of care have the potential to reshape relationships in social -ecological system, as these are grounded in empathy, recognition, and interdependence. This dissertation explores the role of narratives of care in sustainability, with a focus on sustainable food consumption.

This research explores how narratives of care can challenge dominant transactional paradigms and support the co-creation of alternative, relational-based scenarios, that offer wellbeing for humans and more-than-humans. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives - such as Narrative Psychology, Narrative Therapy, the Ethics of Care, and Complex Adaptive Systems theory - this dissertation proposes a framework for narrative transformation that is applied to individual and community narratives around food.

The first manuscript introduces a theoretical framework based on narrative therapy for tilting dominant self-centered narratives toward narratives of care and interdependence. The framework includes three main phases 1) identifying the dominant narrative and the assumptions that sustain it; 2) finding *unique outcomes* or events and experiences that contradict this dominant narrative, and creating alternative narratives of care based on these; and 3) reinforcing care-oriented scenarios. This framework is applied to the topic of consumption and proposes reframing sustainable consumption as an act of care rather than a sacrifice. The proposed shift allows for a deeper engagement with sustainable behaviors, by reframing them in moral and relational terms, as well as by appealing to our human capacity for empathy and responsibility.

In the second manuscript, the framework is applied to the individual food narratives of 22 Colombian adults to understand how the meaning of care linked to food can be expanded to foster sustainable food consumption. Narratives are approached through a qualitative methodology by using life story interviews and participant-created storybooks. This study revealed three alternative stories that question the transactional narratives that see food as a commodity and can aid in expanding the meaning of care to move towards sustainable food systems. These alternative narratives encompass reconnecting with emotions, finding commonalities, and stopping the transmission of suffering.

The third manuscript focuses on the communal level, exploring how care-based narratives are lived, negotiated and transmitted within Nashira, a female-led ecovillage in Colombia. A qualitative methodology - based on ethnography, interviews, and a communal narrative session – is employed to understand how previous narratives are questioned and transformed within a sustainable setting. This study reveals how the community shifts from individual narratives of exclusivity, privatization, and patriarchal hierarchies, to communal narratives of inclusion, sharing, and mutual empowerment. It also reveals the importance of embracing tensions as an essential part of community life and a source of creativity in problem solving.

Together, these three studies demonstrate that - while care can start by conversations questioning the status quo – it is mostly relational, practical, and must be enacted. Everyday acts of care – such as those surrounding food practices – materialize and visualize concerns, playing an essential role in nurturing alternative narratives. These findings contribute to the academic discussion around the role of narratives in sociocultural transformations towards sustainability. This research also offers a framework that can be applied both in academic and non-academic settings, to understand and promote socio-ecological transformations. At the policy level, this work suggests that supporting narratives and acts of care at the individual and community level, can be a vital complement to wider technical and economic sustainability strategies. By transforming the way in which we tell stories about ourselves, our food, and our communities, and by acting on our immediate context, we can shape more caring and sustainable futures.

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Personal acknowledgements

Since this dissertation revolves around narratives, I would like to start my personal acknowledgments with a story. When I was 11 years old, we went on a trip to the countryside with my dad. As I was looking through the window, I saw a family of three on a bike. The kid looked full of joy and was laughing, standing up on some footrests attached to the rear wheel while hugging the dad, who also had a smile on his face. The mom was sitting on a front mounted seat looking at the dad with this teenage crush on her face. There was a bag full of what looked like bread in the front basket. And, running beside the bike, a stray pup was catching up with the family. This image was revealing to me. I wanted my own story to have all of this, love, laughter, food, bikes, and a pup (or two).

This dissertation is dedicated to the wonderful people who have made me who I am through their love. Beyond a Ph.D. this has been a life changing ride, where I discovered something that, deep inside, I already knew: we are here to connect, we are our relationships, and we can transform what's around us through the love we share.

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Dedication

To my pack: Benjamín, Antonio, Clementina, Lulo y Achira.

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General Introduction

It is not a secret that our current food systems are a mayor driver of climate change and environmental degradation and require urgent action (Lade et al., 2020; Willett et al., 2019; WWF, 2020). Yet, the transformations required to achieve more sustainable scenarios are not solely technical or political, but also cultural. A cultural transformation requires reimagining the stories we tell about who we are, how we relate to one another, and how to live with the more-than-human world. This thesis explores the transformative potential of narratives of care in the path to sustainable food consumption scenarios and broader cultural transitions.

Narratives are active forces that can influence behavior, social norms, and socioecological systems (Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). The stories we tell about ourselves and the world around us give meaning to our experiences and shape our relationships. Currently, dominant narratives in consumerist societies under advanced capitalism, often depict humans as inherently self-centered and disconnected from nature (Gladwin et al., 1995; Jackson, 2016). These narratives circulate through media outlets that can be controlled by big companies and reinforce consumption patterns that prioritize individual gain over collective wellbeing and ecological health (Bauman, 2007; Belk, 1985). Narratives around the selfish and extractivist nature of humanity reinforce neoliberal capitalism dynamics where economic production is prioritized and other humans and more-than-humans are seen as sources for profit maximization. Meanwhile, social reproduction is undermined, gendered, and limited to the private sphere (Fraser, 2016). This is connected to a crisis of care that constrains our caring capacity to the household, and involves the commodification of care as the only solution to care outside the household (Fraser, 2016; Tronto, 2017).

However, this portrayal of human nature is incomplete, as humans are also capable of care, cooperation, and altruism beyond gender and blood ties (Gilligan, 2014; Rifkin, 2009; Shaw et al., 2016). Emerging narratives within alternative food networks and community-based initiatives challenge the dominant narrative by emphasizing our capacity to care for each other and for the more than human world (Beacham, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2011). We acknowledge that narratives can coexist and show different versions of humanity, and do not pretend to replace one narrative for the other. Instead, narratives of care can tilt the balance and complete our story by providing a powerful counterpoint to the prevailing culture of individualism and consumption, and by reminding us of a part of our human essence that has been one of the pillars for the survival of our species.

This thesis calls for a more hopeful approach to the environmental crisis, by encouraging the spread of narratives of care where humans can reconnect with the more-than-human world and act towards its

wellbeing. Care, as we find in the studies included in this thesis, is not ideal and romantic, but actionable and relational. Our work follows the definition proposed by Tronto and Fisher (1990) where care comprises everything we do to maintain, repair, and promote the wellbeing of the life-sustaining web that surrounds us. Care involves four stages that encompass *caring about* and identifying someone's particular needs; *caring for* or assuming responsibility for meeting these particular needs; *caregiving* or knowing how to care for those needs; and *care receiving* or getting feedback on how these needs have been met (Tronto, 1998). In this sense, care involves both emotional (affection and concern) and physical (work, acts, and materialization) components (Yeates, 2004). Our work highlights the importance of both, the concern and the action, for narrative change towards sustainable food consumption.

In the context of food consumption, care work has been feminized and restricted to the household, becoming a demanding activity that is usually overlooked. Enacting caring concerns through sustainable food preparation and consumption can be a daunting responsibility, especially when all the labour related to it is undervalued and falls on women (Dixon & Isaacs, 2013; Johnstone & Tan, 2015). However, human capacity of caring through food despite these challenges, questions the dominant extractivist and transactional narrative that sets food as a commodity while prioritizing profit over wellbeing (Vivero-Pol, 2018). Instead, narratives that portray care as a trait shared by humanity (regardless of gender), invite us to see food as a relational practice that seeks to nourish those with whom we share a common present and future. It is through sustainable food practices that we care for an expanded community of fate (Levi, 2020).

In the intersection of care and sustainable food consumption, there is sufficient evidence on the role of care in household food practices (Godin & Langlois, 2021; Paddock, 2017), the impacts of the adoption of vegetarian and vegan diets in the family/social context (Beverland et al., 2015; Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Oliver, 2023), the pursue of better food choices (Aertsens et al., 2009; Cairns et al., 2013; Dholakia & Shukul, 2012; Verain et al., 2015), and the barriers faced when trying to do so (Cairns et al., 2018; Dixon & Isaacs, 2013; Johnstone & Tan, 2015). The evidence regarding healthy and sustainable eating interventions is abundant, but it raises questions about the cultural changes that need to accompany such interventions, particularly when healthy and environmentally friendly choices are not always culturally acceptable (Béné et al., 2019; Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022)

Also, there is a strong body of literature on the intersection between care and the economy, starting with the feminist economics framework, which contested the idea of humans being fully rational and selfish (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Power, 2004; Razavi, 2007). Beyond these, other proponents have raised the importance of a caring economy that includes both the human and the more-than-human world (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Jackson, 2016; Lorek et al., 2023; Raworth, 2018). Finally, the evidence on the role of narratives in complex adaptive systems is promising, focusing in how narratives shape social basins of attraction and the relationship of humanity

with the environment (van der Leeuw, 2020; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021) and the influence of narratives in major economic and cultural outcomes (M. Morris, 2024; Shiller, 2020). Yet, the role of narratives of care in transforming food consumption remains unexplored.

This thesis emerged from the question around the role of narratives of care in sustainability, and more specifically, on sustainable food consumption. The purpose of this research is to understand how narratives that shape our interactions with the human and more-than-human world, emerge, are sustained, and can be transformed. We also explore the role of care in changing these narratives and in shaping more sustainable practices and futures. Food is a case in point, since it is relational, a symbol of care in several cultures, and has relevant environmental and social impacts at a larger scale. To understand the role of narratives of care in sustainable food consumption, we started by developing a framework that allowed us to understand how narratives change. Later, we applied this framework to the stories of 42 people from all walks of life, gathering their narratives through storybooks, life story interviews, and communal narrative sessions.

In this journey to answer our general question, we found additional guiding inquiries that resulted in three research articles presented as chapters in this thesis. The first article (Chapter 1) explores how narratives of care can contribute to shifting basins of attraction towards sustainability, and proposes a three-phase framework to promote narrative change. This framework is grounded in Narrative Therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; A. Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990), Narrative Psychology(Bruner, 1991, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986a), Complex Adaptive Systems theory (Levin et al., 2013; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021), and the Ethics of Care (Gibson-Graham, 2011; Gilligan, 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Tronto, 1998; Tronto & Fisher, 1990). The phases of this framework encompass the identification of dominant narratives and the assumptions that support them, finding “unique outcomes” as counter examples that question the dominant narrative, creating alternative narratives of care, and reinforcing the transmission of these new narratives in scenarios that promote care and sustainability.

The second paper (Chapter 2) applies this framework to the possibility of expanding the meaning of care for sustainable food consumption. We introduce three axes for expanding the meaning of care in food narratives. In the *scope* axis, we propose that narratives must move towards including the human and more-than-human world through recognition. In the *connectedness* axis, we propose that narratives must move towards acknowledging interdependence through vulnerability. In the *identity* axis, we propose that narratives must move towards uniqueness and self-expression through empathy and respect. To understand how stories move along these axes, 22 participants filled up story books with their food narratives and joined life story interviews. Based on our results, we describe three alternative narratives that emerged from participants and can foster sustainable food consumption related to *connecting with emotions (identity axis)*, *finding commonalities (scope axis)*, and *ending the transmission of suffering (connectedness axis)*.

Finally, the third paper (Chapter 3) applies the framework to understanding the journey towards narrative change in caring communities that have developed sustainable food initiatives. We focus on the case of Nashira, a female-led ecovillage in Colombia. In Nashira, care is both an essential part of the shared narratives and an every-day practice that shapes relationships, decision making and the physical space. We analyze this case through the framework proposed in Chapter 1, to understand how pervious narratives around food got questioned and transformed in the community context, leading to ongoing collective action towards sustainability. We find that the narratives in Nashira are now characterized by inclusion, sharing, vulnerability, and peer-to-peer empowerment. We also argue that the tensions embedded in the journey to caring communities must embraced as opportunities for creativity, for honoring differences, and fostering compassion.

Our work contributes to the academic discussion on the role of narratives in cultural transformations towards sustainability. It also adds to the existent literature supporting care-based economies in the path towards more just and environmentally responsible futures. We present a tool that can aid in challenging the dominant economic narrative, and help finding alternative pathways to prioritize the wellbeing of humans and more-than-humans above monetary concerns. Although this is not a study aimed at generalization, the results presented in this document show that enacting individual care concerns is the key to promoting collective action and spreading narratives of care, opening possibilities of further exploration. Our results also show that the materialization of caring initiatives and the wellbeing that comes along with these, are worth the effort and tensions involved in the process. This thesis offers insights for policy members interested in promoting sustainable lifestyles, influencing decision making, and fostering collective action. Finally, our work addresses the cultural and relational dimensions of sustainability transitions, by focusing on the narratives that give meaning to our experiences, on our innate caring capacity, and on the unavoidable vulnerabilities and tensions that makes us human.

Chapter 1: The Role of Care in Creating Narratives for Sustainability[1]

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1. Introduction

Narratives of hopelessness that highlight humanity's ostensibly selfish nature are among the diverse factors that impede collective action to address current environmental crises (Buck, 2015; Marlon et al., 2019). To some, a hopeful vision of the present and future could be mistaken for denial, blurring the sense of urgency and blinding us to the real changes required (Blühdorn, 2017). Although they may seem different, we consider that "false hope" and "fatalistic doubt" are both paralyzing states. "False hope" can be either linked to climate change denial, to a coping strategy, or to expecting the problem to be solved by external forces, hindering action (Ojala, 2023). Yet, under hopelessness and "fatalistic doubt" people get the perception of irresolvability, also generating inaction (Cohen-Chen et al., 2015; Marlon et al., 2019). Without denying the gravity of current environmental challenges, if hope, by fostering agency and grit (Rioux, 2022), leads to acts of care and to make efforts for a better future (Duckworth, 2016), it can be a catalyst for change. For example, constructive hope emerging from seeing others act on their concerns can foster climate change mobilization (Marlon et al., 2019). Also, "hopeful skepticism" allows us to think critically and acknowledge our strengths leading to action (Zaki, 2024). Narratives of hope based on our human capacities for altruism, cooperation, and care for others can foster more sustainable interactions in socioecological systems, when we act on our care concerns.

Moving from the current dominant narrative of despair toward narratives of hope featuring cooperation with other humans and more-than-humans could redirect the dynamics within social-ecological systems toward sustainability (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). Current dominant narratives that highlight a competitive, individualistic, and brutal human nature, benefit power structures that seek to maintain the status quo (Foucault, 1980; Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024). In contrast, narratives of hope present pathways for transformation and allow us to visualize sustainable futures, shaping our expectations and decisions and fostering action (Beckert, 2016; van der Leeuw, 2020). In this paper, we

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propose that care has a role in changing the narrative around human nature, and we offer a framework to move toward a more hopeful version of ourselves.

There is large potential for narratives of care to be part of the transformations in complex socioeconomic systems toward sustainability (Lorek et al., 2023). We understand sustainability as the capacity of a community – composed by humans and more-than-humans - to create and maintain communal existence by managing resources in a way that assures the survival of its members and the environment that surrounds them (Virtanen et al., 2020). Sustainability implies a relational well-being based on the interdependence and the co-existence of the human and more-than-human world (plants, animals, and other lifeforms) (Virtanen et al., 2020). We can achieve sustainability through care, as care involves everything we do to maintain and repair the complex life-sustaining web that surrounds us, so we can achieve and promote well-being (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). In our framework care needs to be actionable and visible in the physical environment to promote change towards sustainability.

Narratives in which humanity can extend its caring capacity to the more-than-human world have an important role in fostering cultural transitions toward sustainability (Groves, 2019). While the pursuit of individual benefit and self-centeredness can be features of the human character, empathy and caring are human strengths and are part of our shared nature (Gilligan, 2014). We are caring animals, and relationships are at the centre of our lives (Tronto, 2017). Humans' innate capacity for empathy is illustrated by our ability to interact and establish relationships very early in life (Brothers, 1989). Far from having a fully selfish nature, we are willing to incur high individual costs to support the wellbeing of others (Batson, 2011). The quest is to expand this caring capacity beyond ourselves and our loved ones to a community of humans and more-than-humans with whom we may share a common space and fate (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Levi, 2020). Alternative narratives based on care emerging at the community level can generate wider changes, affecting society and the environment (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).

This paper emerges from the question around the role of narratives of care in changing the way we see the human essence and provides a framework to aid in changing narratives at a community level. Care has a role in our achieving sustainable futures, as it can change the content of the stories we tell about human nature. Our work contributes to the literature in two ways. First, our framework incorporates narrative therapy tools that have been found to successfully change narratives at the individual and family levels (White & Epston, 1990). We aim to expand narrative therapy to a wide social context by fostering the transmission of narratives of care beyond small social groups to communities and societies. We propose to do this in three synchronous phases: identifying dominant narratives and the assumptions that sustain them, questioning these assumptions by finding events that contradict them, and reinforcing the transmission of alternative and more sustainable narratives through agency. Second, we apply this framework to move from a self-centred consumerist narrative to a caring narrative around sustainable consumption. This framework

serves not just as a revindication of the altruistic traits that humans share; it also offers a pathway for enriching the stories that underlie human–environmental relationships, enhancing sustainability. This framework does not rely on a binary "either/or" conception of care and selfishness. Rather, it acknowledges the paradoxical tensions that arise between coexisting demands (Lewis, 2000) and seeks to tilt the balance toward caring for others in an increasingly individualistic culture (Santos et al., 2017) without passing judgment on the presence of self-centered motives.

Our work also contributes to two strands of the literature: the stream on the role of care in economic systems, and that on the role of narratives in human–environmental relationships. The first topic has been explored within feminist economics and other economic frameworks that include the more-than-human world. Throughout decades, the feminist economics framework has visualized care as a fundamental - but ignored—element of economic dynamics and has contested the conceptualization of human beings as fully rational and selfish (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; Power, 2004; Razavi, 2007). More recently, other authors have moved beyond human-centered issues to explore the role of care in economic systems that acknowledge the more-than-human world (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Lorek et al., 2023). Among these, community economies refer to economic practices that seek to foster wellbeing and redistribute surplus within the community while caring for the natural and cultural commons (Gibson-Graham, 2007; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). Similarly, doughnut economics is a field of study featuring the role of care in an economy that allows humanity to thrive within planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2013, 2018). In addition, authors such as Sam Bowles, with his book *The Moral Economy*, argue that we all have a natural inclination to help and to act altruistically (Bowles, 2016). Moral political economy conceives of humans as caring creatures capable of making choices that recognize the connection between human and nonhuman communities (Carugati & Levi, 2021). The new economics of prosperity highlights the role of care in an economy aimed at increasing social wellbeing, resilience of communities, and quality of the environment (Jackson, 2016). Finally, the concept of just and low-carbon caring societies turns on an economy based on care, where basic human needs are covered and wellbeing is fostered within planetary boundaries (Lorek et al., 2023). Our contribution here is to understand the role of narratives of care in shaping economic dynamics.

The second strand of literature concerns the role of narratives in the relationship of humanity with the environment (van der Leeuw, 2020; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). The relationship between narratives and actions is circular, with narratives shaping actions and actions shaping narratives in return (M. Morris, 2024). Narratives can shape values and emotions, guiding individual pro-environmental actions (B. S. Morris et al., 2019; Nakano & Hondo, 2023), which become contagious and add up (Shiller, 2020), fostering wider cultural changes (M. Morris, 2024). At the same time, actions shape beliefs and the narratives that support them through self-persuasion. Hence, the stories portraying people's actions related to climate

change can motivate further actions by the public (Meyer et al., 2020). This circular relationship between narratives and action is explored in the framework we propose.

Narratives also help us visualize "imagined futures" (Beckert, 2016) and are expected to foster pathways for change leading toward more sustainable scenarios (Bai et al., 2016; Leach et al., 2010). Transition narratives that can aid in moving to more sustainable futures can centre on mechanisms ranging from technological innovation to cultural transformation (Luederitz et al., 2017). Narratives related to technological innovation portray progress and technology as the path toward sustainability, focusing on shallow and wider interventions (Groves, 2019; Luederitz et al., 2017). Narratives related to cultural transformation portray self-restraint as the only way forward, with deep interventions argued to be required to change belief systems and relationships (Groves, 2019; Luederitz et al., 2017). While these mechanisms may seem opposed, both narratives start from the idea of a predatory and devastating human character that needs to be constrained or corrected somehow, with the notion of a caring human nature largely absent. Gesturing towards alternatives, our paper focuses on the role of narratives of care in fostering cultural transformations toward sustainability. It adds to the literature as it aids in understanding the role of narratives of care in shaping economic dynamics, in exploring the circular relationship between narratives and social action, and in expanding the application of Narrative Therapy tools to a wider community context.

In the next section, we introduce the theoretical foundations of our framework. We rely on narrative psychology theory to explain the role of narratives in human–environmental relationships, ethics of care as the foundation to change narrative content, narrative therapy to understand how to generate narrative changes, and complex adaptive systems theory to understand the role of narratives in shaping and changing the dynamics within social-ecological systems. Based on this, in section 3, we elaborate on the three phases of our framework for narrative change: 1) identification of the problem and the story that supports it, 2) creation of possibilities for change, and 3) reinforcement of new scenarios. After each phase, we put the framework into practice by exploring the narrative space around the current consumerist culture and sustainable consumption. Although this is not an empirical validation and does not seek to test if the framework is successful, it gives a glimpse of how to move in the narrative space through the framework application. To achieve further empirical validation, this framework provides the flexibility needed to include context-specific hypotheses and methods, which must be developed considering a local system of beliefs and assumptions, as well as the systemic barriers in place. Since it is based in narratives, empirical validation could include interviews, storytelling, group discussions, and textual analysis on journals and other types of documents. In section 4, we conclude by stating the relevance of initiating conversations that contradict the dominant characterization of human nature as selfish and of acting on our concerns about

caring for others and for the more-than-human world to strengthen the emerging narrative that can help us move to a more sustainable scenario.

2. Theoretical basis

In this section, we start with a definition of sustainability that guides our work and present the theoretical foundations of our framework. We explore the role of narratives in shaping relationships within social-ecological systems, understand the theory behind narrative change, and explore the role of care in changing the content of the stories we tell about humanity. To do so, we bring into dialogue complex adaptive systems theory (Holland, 1992, 1996; Kuhmonen, 2017; Levin et al., 2013; Preiser et al., 2018; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021), narrative psychology (Bruner, 1987, 1991, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986b), narrative therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; A. Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990), and ethics of care (Gibson-Graham, 2011; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1998; Tronto & Fisher, 1990).

The definition of sustainability that guides our work comes from a relational ontology. Under a relational ontology, everything and everyone comes into being through relationships and actors are constantly co-becoming (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; Haraway, 2007). It is relevant to our framework that this definition recognizes that we are part of, interact with, and depend on the more-than-human world (Gibson-Graham, 2011). It must also acknowledge the need to foster the well-being of the human and more-than-human community that sustains life. Hence, our work is guided by a definition of sustainability as the capacity of a community – composed by humans and more-than-humans - to create and maintain communal existence by managing resources in a way that assures the survival of its members and the environment that surrounds them (Virtanen et al., 2020). This aligns with sustainability definitions conceptualized by Indigenous peoples (Heckenberger, 2013; Kealiikanakaoleohaililani & Giardina, 2016; Kimmerer, 2015, 2024), which go beyond the dualism between humans and their environment posed by Brundtland's definition where these are seen as separate and distinct systems (Datta, 2015; J. Johnson et al., 2013).

2.1. The role of narratives in shaping human–environmental relationships

Narratives are stories that give meaning to the world around us, shape our experiences, and mediate our relationships (Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives are fundamental in the formation of our identity (White, 2004). The stories that we tell about ourselves are informative about the reasons behind our actions, help us connect our actions into episodes, and provide coherence and meaning to the crucial moments in our life (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986b). Narratives are relevant since they not only make sense of our past and present experiences, but also influence what we imagine and what we consider to be possible in the future.

Narratives allow cultural adaptation to a changing world, bringing together the information that we need to understand our current experience and predict the outcomes of certain behaviors. They are not static, can be negotiated, and are created collaboratively (Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). Among the ways in which cultures transmit their norms and values, narratives allow cultural coherence to be maintained and behaviors to be shaped according to cultural requirements (Bruner, 2010). As an example, family values that link happiness with the fulfillment of certain consumption patterns are transmitted intergenerationally, shaping the future consumption behaviors of children (Moore-Shay & Berchmans, 1996).

Narratives can also create cultural and economic changes, given their transmissible and relatable properties. An audience can adopt a story to such an extent that it becomes part of the audience's self-story and identity, guiding its behaviors and decisions (Davis, 2002; White, 2004). These aggregate stories can result in sociocultural movements and economic outcomes that support or generate change (Arthur, 2021; Shiller, 2020; Squire, 2012). A narrative can become less effective in explaining the current experience and challenges that a social group faces (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021), and this opens the space for the appearance and spread of new narratives that allow social-ecological systems to change.

In social-ecological systems, narratives work as social attractors, influencing interactions, affecting how societies process information, and shaping basins of attraction (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). An attractor is a point or set of points toward which the system evolves and accumulates (Milnor, 1985). Basins of attraction are the spaces that comprise the trajectories of elements that move toward attractors (Nusse & Yorke, 1996). Narratives become social attractors, meaning the points towards social-ecological systems accumulate within a social basin of attraction. Social-ecological systems move, organize, and stabilize around basins of attraction (Holling, 1973) that are shaped by narratives. Therefore, narratives can influence interactions at social-ecological systems by shaping a given basin of attraction (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021), affecting behaviors and aiding in self-organization through norm transmission.

Narratives can make a basin of attraction more resilient, by reinforcing its capacity to make the social-ecological system "jump back" and self-organize in its previous state after being impacted by changes (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). Resilience refers to the capacity of a system to absorb perturbations and reorganize to keep its structure and feedbacks (Walker et al., 2004). We suggest that norms transmitted through narratives aid in this self-organization process, by fostering behaviors that can keep the social system in a certain state. Cultures pass on their norms through narratives, which help make norms interpretable and actionable (Bruner, 1991, 2010). Social norms are powerful, as these prescribe the behaviors expected in certain contexts and situations (Bicchieri, 2005), strengthening the dynamics and feedbacks within a basin of attraction. Yet, narratives and norms can evolve. Norms evolve because of environmental changes, individual decisions, and the history of successes of the norm (Gelfand et al., 2024).

We would add that norms evolve along with narratives to keep coherence, in a process where the narrative influences the norm and vice versa. Although certain narratives linked to specific norms could have been beneficial in adapting to a socioenvironmental context in the past, they may be mismatched to the current context, opening possibilities for change.

When the ecological, economic, or social conditions of a system become untenable (Walker et al., 2004), a change in narratives can guide the self-organization dynamics of the system. Narratives can foster cultural transitions through a change in norms and by shaping basins of attraction. In the face of environmental changes and perturbations, if the system cannot self-organize around the previous narrative and the social norms do not respond to the change, the system reorganizes around a different narrative, and individuals are more prone to adopt new norms (Folke, 2006; Gelfand et al., 2024). Narratives of hope could serve as new attractors that shape new social basins of attraction, if they spread along diverse human sociocultural systems. Such narratives present transformation pathways and allow us to visualize different futures, motivating action toward these futures (Beckert, 2016; Milkoreit, 2017; van der Leeuw, 2020).

2.2. Transforming narratives to transform human–environmental relationships

Narratives can foster path dependence and lock-ins in social-ecological systems by integrating coherent new events into the dominant version of the story and by leaving out events that contradict it. Path dependence refers the significant impact that past decisions and events can have on the present and future development of a system. In a self-reinforcing loop, new outcomes are developed based on past decisions, hindering the possibility of switching to new alternatives. One of the key outcomes of path dependence in socioeconomic systems is the phenomenon of lock-in (Arthur, 1989). Lock-in occurs when a particular basin of attraction becomes entrenched to the point that switching to an alternative basin is prohibitively difficult or costly even if that alternative might be more efficient or desirable (Walker et al., 2004). We are currently experiencing a lock-in state that determines unsustainable human–environmental relationships and is reinforced by an incomplete narrative about human nature that alludes to selfishness.

To challenge dominant narratives that foster lock-in states, it is necessary to understand the elements that maintain and reinforce the problems emerging from these narratives. Narratives around the problems we face have a set of meanings and assumptions that keep them alive and help the problem survive (White & Epston, 1990). Since dominant narratives portray problems as internal or inherent to people, the first step is to externalize the problem (White & Epston, 1990). *Externalization* refers to conversations in which problems are not inherent to people's identities and rather survive thanks to a net of behaviors and interactions that generate a series of effects on a system (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Tomm, 1989; White & Epston, 1990). In the case of social-environmental relationships an "unsustainable, selfish and extractive nature" has been presented as part of diverse cultures around the world (Borgerhoff Mulder & Coppolillo,

2005). However, there are several examples on how humans can also display selfless actions and care for other species even when they must assume costs and there is no direct benefit for them (Carter, 1988; Donovan, 1990; Solnit, 2010). Hence, the idea of an "unsustainable, selfish, and extractive nature" can be externalized, as this is not an unavoidable part of the human essence. *Externalizing conversations* are tools that allow us to find and question the assumptions keeping the problem alive, showing us new ways of interacting with the problem to solve it, increase cooperation, and take responsibility for how these assumptions contribute to the survival of the problem (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007).

After the problem has been externalized, it is possible to find *unique outcomes* that contradict the dominant narrative (A. Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). Unique outcomes are events that contradict the dominant story and show previously ignored parts of our experience, proving that other versions of the story are possible (A. Morgan, 2000). After unique outcomes are identified, it is relevant to agree on new assumptions that justify them and serve as pillars for alternative stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007). *Alternative stories* are counterplots built upon unique outcomes that can be named and richly described, setting the scenario for new interactions (A. Morgan, 2000). In the case of the stories we tell about human nature, care can become an alternative narrative content that supports the idea of our capacity of promoting the wellbeing of the more-than-human world, aiding in more sustainable human-environmental relationships.

New narratives can challenge dominant narratives, flow through social-ecological systems, and shape new ways of interacting with others through the spread of emerging social norms (Gelfand et al., 2024; van der Leeuw, 2020; White & Epston, 1990). Alternative narratives based on care can call into question dominant narratives that acknowledge only a conception of human nature as selfish and utilitarian. The power of narratives for reshaping relationships (A. Morgan et al., 2008) can be extended to our relationship with the more-than-human world.

2.3. Narratives around human essence: Care as an alternative narrative content

As a storytelling species, we have created a variety of narratives around the human essence. From self-centered to collectivistic narratives, we have tried to explain our complex nature by using certain assumptions, and this assumptions end up influencing how we behave in different contexts (Bowles, 2016; Kluver et al., 2014). For instance, the assumption of self-interested and amoral people has motivated the development of economic incentives that end up undermining genuinely cooperative and generous intentions (Bowles, 2016). For decades, homo economicus was one of economists' "favorite species", presenting a narrative that portrayed humanity as selfish and greedy (Persky, 1995). While we recognize that this narrative does not represent people across the world, it has been lingering for a while at the base

of the neoliberal economic model (Raworth, 2018) in western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies (Henrich, 2020).

Narratives in which humanity is seen as an insatiable, predatory force do not offer a solution to the issues that threaten the survival of the human and more-than-human species (Buck, 2015). Instead, these narratives rationalize inaction (Q. D. Atkinson & Jacquet, 2022), fueling an inauspicious scenario in which disturbances will become more frequent and severe. Humans test narratives by their verisimilitude, not by their verifiability (Bruner, 2010). When 98% of the news about human-environmental relationships is negative (Meyer et al., 2020), people's availability heuristics are fed with hopelessness. Hence, if transmitted widely in a human group, narrative contents around a selfish human nature can be considered an unmodifiable trait shared by our species, despite being a function of cultural and power structures. Those in power set the agenda and defend the narratives that justify their privileges, while protecting an unsustainable and unjust system (Fuchs et al., 2016; Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024).

Under the homo economicus narrative that sustains neoliberal capitalist dynamics, greed is considered an unavoidable aspect of the human essence, which justifies and strengthens extractive actions, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which humans are "condemned" to seek individual accumulation and deplete natural resources. This narrative shapes the system in a way that makes it easy to self-organize around an unsustainable basin of attraction. However, social-ecological systems can also self-organize around alternative narratives that centre our capacity for care as social attractors, fostering individual behaviors and system dynamics to maintain human prosperity and planetary health.

While care and collaboration acts are abundant, a dominant narrative based on greed and selfishness may lead us to focus on acts that confirm a negative story and to doubt other's intentions. Yet, we find the opposite in many places. In times of crises, humans solidarize with each other despite having lost everything and not being related (Solnit, 2010). During COVID-19 volunteering, donations, and helping strangers increased despite economic constraints (Zaki, 2024). Caring is more the rule than the exception, making it relevant to strengthen alternative narratives that reinforce this version of ourselves.

Moreover, we tend to assume that others have motives and values different from ours, underestimating their virtues and willingness to cooperate (D. T. Miller & McFarland, 1991; Zaki, 2024). A social experiment showed that 80% of lost wallets got returned across 40 countries, with a higher likelihood of being returned when containing more money, contrary to the expectation of most people being untrustworthy (Cohn et al., 2019). While most people think that only 40% of the population would support climate-related initiatives, this number is actually closer to 75% (Sparkman et al., 2022).

Alternative narratives to explain human nature go beyond the simplicity of self-centeredness to incorporate the complexity of human psychology and collectivistic motivations. *Homo Heuristicus*, emerges from the study of people's heuristics and biases when making decisions (Kahneman et al., 1982),

disproving the prevalence of motives related to maximizing individual benefit. *Homo duplex*, was a term first mentioned by Émile Durkheim, to refer to the dualism between human´s individualistic (lower level or profane) and collectivistic (higher level or sacred) motivations (Durkheim, 1915; Kluver et al., 2014). *Sapiens integra* refers to the whole, connected, caring human being who can only thrive in the interaction with others and the environment (Cottam, 2020). Challenging the assumption of an individualistic and disconnected human essence, experiments to transform the welfare state under the *Sapiens Integra* narrative have shown the value of fostering human capabilities such as belonging and contributing to a human and planetary community, and having supportive and close relationships (Cottam, 2019). Narratives based on care such as the Sapiens Integra narrative can tilt the balance towards a more connected and empathic essence of humanity, capable of fostering planetary well-being.

As caring animals, we are wired to build relationships, cooperate, help, and act altruistically (Bowles, 2016; Gelfand et al., 2024). Caring for others is one of our strengths as a species: we survive as a group through altruistic behaviors that sometimes require individuals to incur substantial costs (Gilligan, 2014; Levi, 2020). Care involves the concern for increasing our own and others' wellbeing and how we enact this concern (Tronto, 1998). In our framework, we understand care as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and 'repair' our world, so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web" (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p.40). We include the Ethics of Care in our framework, as it understands the interdependencies involved in fostering wellbeing and sustaining life.

Our capacity for caring is inherent to us and can transcend to a wider and more-than-human community. We have shown this capacity in the relationships we establish with companion species (Haraway, 2007). Caring and building relationships with non-human others requires attending to them as kin by respecting and learning from them (Desai & Smith, 2018). We have also shown cooperative behavior that extends beyond the close nuclear family, to help strangers in times of crisis and upheld ethical norms (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Solnit, 2010). However, care must not be idealized as it requires a commitment to meeting the needs of others, while balancing one's own needs (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Shaw et al., 2016; Tronto & Fisher, 1990). Caring for the more-than-human world comes with evident tensions when, by fostering the well-being of specific individuals, the lives of others are at risk, implying trade-offs (P. J. Johnson et al., 2019). Considering that caring relationships emerge within a "complex life-sustaining web," caring for a wider community means extending our solidarity within this web to the human and more-than-human world, while trying to balance those tensions (de la Cadena, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2011; Levi, 2020).

Narratives of care for the more-than-human world could foster a wider community of fate. A community of fate includes those with whom we share a common present and future and are willing to act in solidarity (Levi, 2020). While in some societies altruism is limited to a close human group (Henrich, 2020), we now

need to recognize our interdependency with other humans and more-than-humans with whom we share this common home and expand our community of fate such that it includes them (Levi, 2020; Pope Francis, 2015). In this sense, it is essential to overcome the human/nonhuman binary division that places "us" separate from and superior to "others" (de la Cadena, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2011). In addition, as we are all interdependent and are all becoming together (Bawaka Country et al., 2013), it is relevant to enact an ethics of care in which our concerns and actions are aimed at the wellbeing of these others.

While the role of narratives in shaping social-ecological systems has been identified (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021), there is still much to be explored regarding how narratives of care can change how we see ourselves as part of the current sustainability challenges. Also, the literature on how narratives change at the societal level is scarce. Our work sets a theoretical basis to study a change in narratives that can be expanded to a wider social context. As we will present in the following section, our theoretical framework can aid in questioning current assumptions, creating alternative narratives, acting on those narratives, and reinforcing sustainable futures.

3. Changing narratives for sustainability: The framework

Based on the theory presented above, we develop a framework that expands the potential of narrative change from the individual and the family to a wider social-ecological context. In this framework care becomes the narrative content that creates possibilities for change and strengthens new scenarios. We suggest that, to create permanent change in complex social-ecological systems, we need to go through three synchronized phases that allow the system to move from its current basin of attraction to an alternative one. These phases are presented in Figure 1 and encompass 1) identification of the problem and the story that supports it, 2) creation of possibilities for change, 3) and reinforcement of new scenarios. Our framework seeks to generate a change in narratives at the individual and socio-cultural levels. A change in narratives is supported on Narrative Therapy theory, which has been applied successfully to individuals and families and is presented above and below. Although this framework focuses on generating changes in narratives, it can also generate changes in culture by targeting different key levels in culture such as individuals, their interactions, and ideas (Hamedani et al., 2023). Each phase by itself, when considered in isolation and independently from the rest of the framework, will not lead to narrative change.

After presenting the theory and mechanisms behind each phase, we illustrate how the framework would work to shift one of the narratives around human nature within a consumerist culture. Sustainable consumption is a case in point, as consuming more sustainably is still seen in many cases as implying undesirable sacrifices that selfish humans are not willing to make (Delmas & Lessem, 2015; Johnstone & Tan, 2015; Macdiarmid et al., 2016). We start by expounding on the role of the *homo economicus* narrative

in the current consumerist culture. Then, we call this narrative into question by highlighting unique outcomes that undermine its supporting arguments. Finally, we present how narratives around sustainable consumption can be based on care rather than on sacrifice.

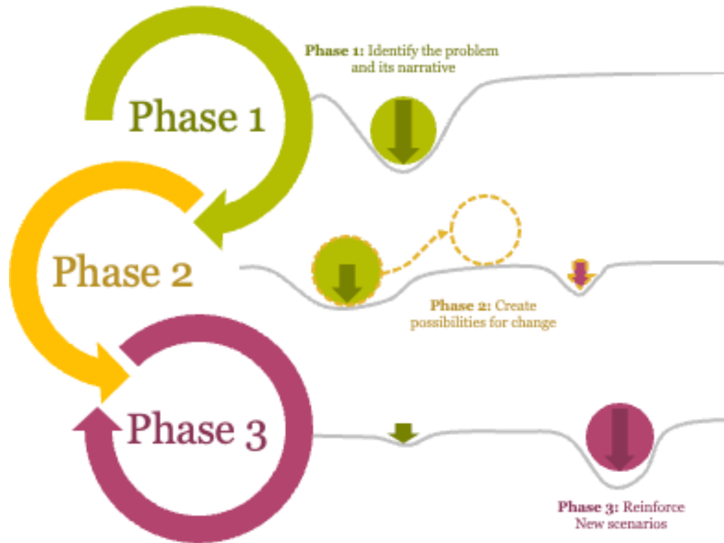

Figure 1. Framework to foster narrative changes in three synchronized phases.

3.1. Phase 1: Identify the dominant narrative and the problem

In the first step, detailed in Figure 2, the contributions of van der Leeuw and Folke (2021) regarding social basins of attraction in complex adaptive systems (see section 2.1), helps us identify the underlying narratives shaping the basin of attraction in which the social-ecological system is embedded and that may be linked to specific challenges. We represent the social-ecological system by the green sphere present in the grey basin of attraction. The dark green arrow represents how narratives shape the dynamics of the system, working as a social attractor that keeps it in the basin of attraction. In the first box of Figure 2, we propose that it is necessary to identify the dominant narratives that serve the regime by shaping behaviors (Foucault, 1980), reinforcing feedback loops that assure success to the successful (D. H. Meadows, 2008), and hindering transformative action (Fuchs et al., 2016). We tend to act coherently with the dominant narrative and stick to its norms, strengthening the dominant regime or basin of attraction while ignoring other alternatives. According to Narrative Therapy, when we stick to the dominant narrative, it can carry and foster the survival of problems and challenges faced by the system (White & Epston, 1990).

Also, under Narrative Psychology theory, in this self-fulfilling process, it is assumed that some problems are inherent to people, part of their identity, and hard—if not impossible—to change (Tomm, 1989). The assumptions that underlie narratives work as the filters through which we process the world around us. When our experiences correspond to these shared assumptions, in a positive feedback loop, we confirm a stronger narrative that fosters deeper social basins of attraction and stronger path dependence.

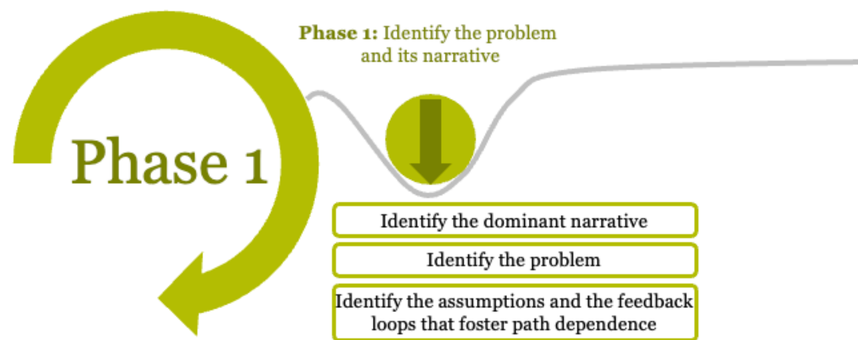

Figure 2. Phase 1: Identifying the dominant narrative, the problem it describes, and the assumptions that keep the problem alive and foster path dependence.

We can become trapped in a basin of attraction shaped by a narrative in which the problem seems unsolvable because it is understood as inherent to our nature. This would be represented by a green sphere that cannot move away from the basin of attraction shaped by the attractor (in this case the narrative). However, when we identify the problem contained in a narrative, it can then be externalized so we can address the relationship with it in a different way (White, 2007). To do so, we need to start seeing the problem as an external outcome of our actions and relationships, not as part of our identity (White & Epston, 1990). Then, it is necessary to identify the assumptions and the feedback loops that keep the problem alive and foster path dependency. Only after the problem and the assumptions behind it have been identified can the system start moving to the edges and beyond the basin of attraction. Tackling each assumption by showing evidence and facts that support other possibilities can help create negative feedback loops that threaten the current narrative and weaken the structure of its basin of attraction.

3.1.1. Phase 1 in practice: Homo economicus and consumerist culture

Although it has been widely revoked (Bowles & Gintis, 1993; Henrich et al., 2001), the *homo economicus* narrative seems to prevail becoming mainstream in economics textbooks, guiding the development of public policy, and even shaping how people behave in the workplace (Bowles, 2016; Fleming, 2017; Raworth, 2018). This narrative survives since it involves a given-for-granted scheme that

aids in the interpretation of everyday economic interactions under its assumptions (Ailon, 2020). The extractive nature of humanity in human-environmental relationships seems to be easily identified in day-to-day practices strengthening that narrative (Kimmerer, 2015). *Homo economicus* is understood as an autonomous and independent actor driven by utility maximization (Bowles & Gintis, 1993; Gladwin et al., 1995; Morin, 2004). This narrative becomes one of the drivers of a consumerist culture, defined by the prioritization of individual desires, the accumulation, and the later disposal of commodities after achieving instant satisfaction, overlooking the damages imposed on a wider context (Bauman, 2007). The narrative of homo economicus as part of a consumerist society, insinuate a selfish being, who insatiably devours what is around them.

The assumptions that maintain this narrative reinforce the implication of humanity's inherent unsustainability and are reinforced by the context. First, the *homo economicus* narrative relies on the assumption of a selfish, greedy, and extractive human essence. This has been reinforced by a socioeconomic system prioritizing GDP growth over the social and environmental impacts linked to it (Daly, 2005). Second, the narrative assumes that human wellbeing and survival can be achieved only through individual accumulation of items offered by the market (Jackson, 2016). The idealization of self-mastery and self-enhancement reinforces this in a context where humans, through their consumption practices, must themselves become desirable products for consumption (Bauman, 2007; Henrich, 2020; Tronto, 2017). Third, the narrative assumes that consumerism is the main mode of social participation (Jackson, 2013). This is reinforced by social norms and market dynamics that demand constant renovation of the self through consumption to "keep up with the Joneses" and to gain or maintain status within a social group (Jaccard, 2020; Jackson, 2013).

Under—and reinforcing—the *homo economicus* narrative emerged a socioeconomic system that has lifted most of the human population out of extreme poverty. Within this system, self-interest works as the driver of common progress (Friedman, 1970). Modern economic growth, driven by individual accumulation of capital, mass production and consumption, allowed for higher living standards in many segments of the population (Krausmann et al., 2016; Sachs, 2015). Derived from this, global education, employment, and wider access to technology improved health and reduced mortality (Allen, 2011; Bloom, 2011). The *homo economicus* narrative has accompanied a human era characterized by exponential population growth and improvements in individual life expectancy. This success makes it hard to question the three assumptions that keep the idea of our "unsustainable essence" alive, paralyzing us and impeding action, as it seems almost impossible to change something that has become so entrenched in the identity of humanity. Hence, it is necessary to call the assumptions into question through evidence and facts that show a different version of the human story.

3.2. Phase 2: Create possibilities for change

Creating possibilities for change is based on Narrative Therapy theory (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Tomm, 1989; White & Epston, 1990), and on the contributions of of van der Leeuw and Folke (2021) regarding social basins of attraction. This phase has a three-fold function. First, it opens the possibility for alternative narratives by questioning the current one and reducing its strength. This is shown by a smaller green arrow. Since the current narrative is the social attractor that shapes the basin of attraction where the system is locked, when reducing its strength its shaped also changes decreasing its depth. Second, a less deep basin of attraction opens the possibility for the system to explore the edges of the basin of attraction, and see what else is happening in the landscape. This is represented by the yellow intermittent arrow and circle leaving the basin of attraction. Third, creating and defining alternative narratives can shape an alternative basin of attraction where the system can move. This is represented by the small purple arrow (Figure 3).

Considering the evidence provided by Narrative Therapy authors and the contributions of van der Leeuw & Folke (2021) on the social dynamics of basins of attraction, creating possibilities for change implies externalizing the problem, weakening the dominant narrative and offering an attractive alternative narrative that allows the system to self-organize around it. *Externalizing the problem* refers to the possibility of detaching the problem from human nature and starting to see it as a result of the assumptions, behaviors, and interactions in human groups (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Tomm, 1989; White & Epston, 1990). *Unique outcomes* are facts that contradict the dominant story and prove that alternative story versions are possible (White & Epston, 1990). Identifying *unique outcomes* weakens the current narrative, as these can strengthen internal conversations around care and aid in the questioning of underlying assumptions in the current narrative. As Figure 3 shows, we can identify *unique outcomes*, helping create alternative narratives around care. Narratives of care based on these *unique outcomes* can become attractive as they contain elements of novelty while remaining familiar. This sets the basis for breaking the lock-in that currently prevails in socioeconomic systems.

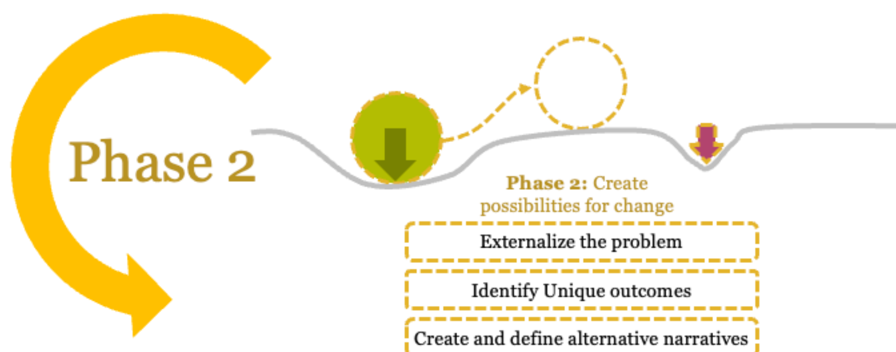

Figure 3. Phase 2: Externalizing the problem, identifying unique outcomes as the basis for the creation of an alternative narrative, and creating possibilities for change.

As reflective beings, constant *Internal conversations* monitor the concerns arising from our relationship with the world and from ourselves (Archer, 2006). We simultaneously observe and are part of the more-than-human world at the same time. When we realize that our survival depends on the survival of a wider community and that care is essential in this quest, we can start deviating from the dominant narrative and enhance our efforts to question assumptions (Garud et al., 2010). Then, internal conversations can allow us to build new assumptions by *finding unique outcomes* (A. Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). When we listen to our internal conversations around care and identify alternative events or experiences showing that we can care for others, we can reflect on these and recreate our identities based on these alternative stories about ourselves.

Unique outcomes can also be identified in the response of a socioeconomic system to *external shocks*. External shocks are perturbations that threaten the stability of complex systems (Halekotte & Feudel, 2020). While some external shocks are not permanent, they alter the dynamics of the system, promoting new practices and learning. For instance, human societies respond altruistically and cooperate in disasters (Solnit, 2010). By learning about possibilities, we can start questioning and changing the assumptions behind the narrative and—since narratives shape social basins of attraction—this can change the stability of the current basin of attraction. Hence, learning from external shocks can also weaken the current basin of attraction and strengthen alternative basins of attraction. This can then be seized to challenge the assumptions behind the current dominant narrative, nurturing and strengthening the alternative narrative of care.

In addition to acting on our internal conversations and external shocks, having an attractive and strong alternative narrative is necessary to shape a basin of attraction around which the system can settle and reorganize (Carpenter et al., 2001). As Figure 3 shows, *unique outcomes* based on internal conversations and external shocks help create alternative narratives based on facts that have been experienced but somehow overlooked in the past. Although these alternative narratives can be perceived as counterintuitive and present a version that conflicts with the dominant story, they must still fit under our pre-existing schemas (Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). That is, alternative narratives can be foreign only to some extent and can support themselves in less common but attractive scenarios that people somehow experience. A socioeconomic system cannot move away from its current narrative unless it has an attractive "something-else-yet-somehow-familiar" narrative to move toward (Varnum & Grossmann, 2017).

It is possible to define an alternative narrative based on care when we focus on the unique outcomes that prove our capacity for altruism, fostering wellbeing through meaningful relationships, and helping each other (Cottam, 2020; Tronto, 2017). *Sapiens integra* and *homines curans* are examples of these alternative ways of seeing humanity. *Sapiens integra* refers to the whole, connected, caring human being who can thrive only in interaction with others and the environment (Cottam, 2020). Similarly, *homines curans* emerges from the relational and caring nature of human beings, capable of having a sense of collective fate (Tronto, 2017). Narratives of care are familiar as empathy and caring are human strengths and part of our shared nature (Gilligan, 2014). We have all experienced care, as all humans are recipients and givers of care at some point in our lives (Gilligan, 2014; Tronto, 2017). Despite a socioeconomic system that embraces selfishness and the maximization of individual benefits, we cannot ignore that humans are caring animals and that relationships make our lives meaningful (Tronto, 2017; Waldinger & Schulz, 2023).

3.2.1. Phase 2 in practice: Questioning homo economicus

While in the *homo economicus* narrative unsustainable consumption is seen as a result of the orthogonality of human nature to sustainability, we propose that we can externalize this issue and start seeing it as an outcome of our assumptions and disconnection of society from the environment instead. Understanding unsustainable consumption as a matter of assumptions and socioenvironmental disconnect opens possibilities for action since assumptions can change and we can work on becoming more connected with a wider community.

Assumptions regarding human nature, human wellbeing, and the main mode of social participation underlying the *homo economicus* narrative can be called into question through internal conversations related to care. We can reinforce these motivations by finding *unique outcomes* that work as the basis for alternative stories about a caring human essence. First, we can call into question the assumption that human nature is selfish, greedy, and extractive by acknowledging that these human traits coexist with care and altruism in the human character. Although egoistic motivations and free-rider behaviors are present in humanity, the human species is also one of the few capable of displaying altruistic behaviors beyond kin groups even if there is no individual benefit from doing so (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). Alternative food initiatives that have directed their practices to nourish the more-than-human world while sometimes nourishing people (Beacham, 2018) can be considered *unique outcomes* that show humanity's capacity for caring. In addition, humanity's capacity for caring through everyday consumption is shown in *unique outcomes* such as the decrease in animal-based products in the diet (Ploll et al., 2020) and increasing adoption and retention of meat-free diets (Asano & Biermann, 2019). Humans have shown themselves able to care for nonhuman

companion species as we become aware of our shared existence and of our responsibility in interspecies flourishing (Haraway, 2016). Sustainable consumption is an activity that can be guided by a conscious sense of caring for the wellbeing of humans, nonhumans, and nature.

Second, the assumption that human wellbeing and survival can be achieved only through the individual enjoyment and accumulation of goods and services offered by the market can be destabilized by the benefits to wellbeing emerging from human relationships and from systems of public provision of goods and services (Cottam, 2019; Jackson, 2016). Although seeking novelty can generate instant gratification, materialism and the individual accumulation of material objects can have negative effects on human wellbeing as material values generate tension (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002) and are related to envy, ungenerosity, and possessiveness (Belk, 1985). Instead, human wellbeing and happiness rely on connection and meaningful relationships (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). Connecting with others benefits both mental and physical wellbeing (Murthy, 2020). An alternative narrative for sustainable consumption must reflect our capacity for connecting and creating meaningful relationships. Related *unique outcomes* have been illustrated by a series of experiments in which a failing welfare system based on transferring money and creating dependence was successfully transformed toward creating capabilities and fostering human connection (Cottam, 2019). Other *unique outcomes* are observable in how people create community around growing food, strengthening human connections while providing healthy options to low-income consumers.

Third, doubt can be cast on the assumption that consumerism is humans' main mode of social participation when we realize that our relationships can revolve around helping and caring for each other. Reactions of human groups to external shocks, such as natural and human-induced disasters, have shown that we can connect on a deeper level beyond consumerism and are capable of cooperating and caring for each other in times of crisis (Solnit, 2010). This can be illustrated by the volunteer-led groups that distributed groceries to low-income households with limited access to food during COVID-19. When disasters happen, the dawning realization of our shared humanity, detached from social status, can help us prioritize the survival of others alongside our own (Solnit, 2010). Cooperation is rewarding and gratifying, reinforcing further acts of reciprocal altruism (Rilling et al., 2002). These unique outcomes strengthen a narrative in which connecting and sharing can also be a gratifying form of social participation.

Under the dominant *homo economicus* narrative, defying our selfish nature is seen as costly—that is, as requiring sacrifice. It is assumed that we always prioritize the satisfaction of our wants and the maximization of individual benefits through consumerism (Urbina & Ruiz-Villaverde, 2019). Hence, sustainable consumption becomes "too hard," "too inconvenient," and "too weird," and to make things worse, its outcomes are "invisible and uncertain" (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Sustainable consumption

involves restrictions and pointless sacrifices in a world where those who are to blame for the environmental and social crises are still accumulating profits with impunity (Jaccard, 2020; Macdiarmid et al., 2016). Under this conceptualization of human nature, the path toward sustainable consumption involves restraining our predatory nature and silencing our loss aversion. Framing sustainable consumption in the terms of restriction and sacrifice is unappealing and may lead to rejection, strengthening narratives of hopelessness in which the orthogonality of human nature to sustainability will inevitably lead us to collapse.

An alternative narrative that foregrounds the caring part of ourselves in our consumption practices emerges from our questioning of these assumptions. This narrative is in line with the concepts of *sapiens integra* and *homines curans* in the sense that it portrays humans as relational beings who belong to a connected and interdependent more-than-human world (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010; Tronto, 2017). This alternative narrative fosters consciousness about the need to maintain the health of an interconnected system for our survival and instantiate these concerns in consumption practices that seek the wellbeing of humans and their environment. It also sees thriving as a collective task that depends on care, with all of us being recipients and givers of care at some point (Cottam, 2019; Tronto, 2017). The narrative highlights our vulnerability and dependence on a wider network and links our wellbeing to the quality of our relationships rather than the consumption of material goods. Finally, this alternative narrative does not assume that all beings and caring relations can be treated equally but instead that it is necessary to acknowledge differences (Cottam, 2019; de la Cadena, 2019). Caring needs cannot be solved by a universal formula provided by the market but rather must be addressed through relationships developed empathetically and respectfully.

3.3. Phase 3: Reinforce new scenarios

This phase is based on Narrative Therapy theory (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Tomm, 1989; White & Epston, 1990) and Social Basins of Attraction Theory (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021) to show how the system moves and stays at a new basin of attraction. As it is represented in the figure, the alternative narrative (purple arrow) is now stronger shaping the alternative basin of attraction by making it deeper and attracting the system to stay in it. The previous narrative (green arrow) is weaker but still exists, since the self-interested version of humanity does not disappear completely. Once the alternative narrative emerges, it is necessary to reinforce it to foster the stability of its social basin of attraction and guarantee the permanence of the system in it (Halekotte & Feudel, 2020). This can be done by reinforcing agency and

promoting the transmission of narratives of care within and among system levels.

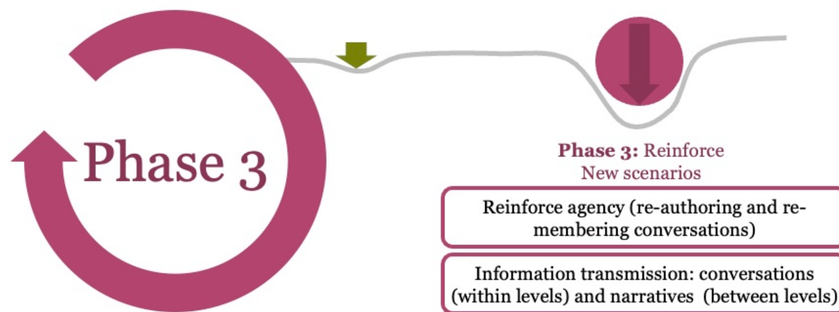

Figure 4. Phase 3: Reinforcing new scenarios through reinforcing agency and promoting narrative transmission.

We understand agency as a property emerging from the interactions of actors within networks (Garud et al, 2010). Agency is the capacity to shape our destiny and help each other actively participate in what happens in our lives and context (Pelenc et al., 2015). Agency happens at the individual, the socially mediated, and the collective levels (Bandura, 2006b). It allows individuals or human groups to increase their wellbeing and to become a driving force in their own development (Petesch et al., 2005). Agency comprises being conscious about the need to act and transform ourselves and the world around us, expressing this concern through individual voluntary actions, connecting and joining others to make collective choices, and re-evaluating actions and choices to learn from them and build new capacities for action (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Agency aids in path creation as it enables our capacity to question the assumptions behind the self-reinforcing narrative that has shaped our unsustainable environment and thus promotes the creation of a new narrative and allows us to escape narrative lock-in (Garud & Karnoe, 2001).

Just as agency aids in the emergence of alternative narratives, narratives can strengthen our capacity to act and interact differently (A. Morgan, 2000; White, 2007). In the first box of Figure 4, we show that narratives can strengthen agency through *re-authoring and re-membering conversations* (White, 2007). *Re-authoring conversations* foster rich stories where people have agency over their lives, can decide the meaning of their experiences, and can collaborate to reach understandings (White, 2007). *Re-membering conversations* include discourses reconnecting us with significant relationships, selecting the "members" of our alternative story, and highlighting how we can enrich the lives of others through the enactment of this story (A. Morgan, 2000). When *re-authoring and re-membering conversations* revolve around caring and connecting with others, these conversations can turn into narratives that open new ways of existing in the world, and can foster the expansion of our communities of fate (Levi, 2020).

Our framework, also uses the theory of collective agency proposed by Fernandez-Wulf (2019) and the concept of care described by Tronto (1998) to explain how agency also fuels information transmission at multiple levels. Agency it aids in the materialization of individual care concerns into action, making them visible to others and starting conversations that can add up into narratives of care. In Figure 5, we present a conceptual model of how individual agency can lead to narrative change and influence and shape public policy. The model is cyclical, indicating that the process is ongoing and iterative. As we show in Figure 5, the agency model is broken down into three progressive stages and three parallel narrative stages that influence and are influenced by the agency stages. The first stage, *consciousness* and *starting conversations*, is represented by an individual and two speech bubbles: when an external shock appeals to our internal conversations, we start having conversations among group members (e.g., family, friends) to make sense of this and become conscious of the need to transform what is happening around us (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Under a scenario shaped by narratives of care, this requires attentiveness to spoken and unspoken caring needs and decisions about what needs to be cared for (Tronto, 1998). In the second stage, *individual voluntary action* and *conversations that question assumptions*, conversations around care can happen within different human groups simultaneously (shown as networks in the figure), leading to individual voluntary actions and the materialization of care in the physical environment (represented by the hands in the figure) (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Making conversations around care material entails assuming the responsibility of meeting others' needs through actions that are visible to others (Tronto, 1998) and that call into question the assumptions of the dominant self-centered narrative. Within system levels, care permeates everyday conversations (represented by the speech bubbles) happening in our networks, as we meet care needs and perform care tasks (Tronto, 1998).

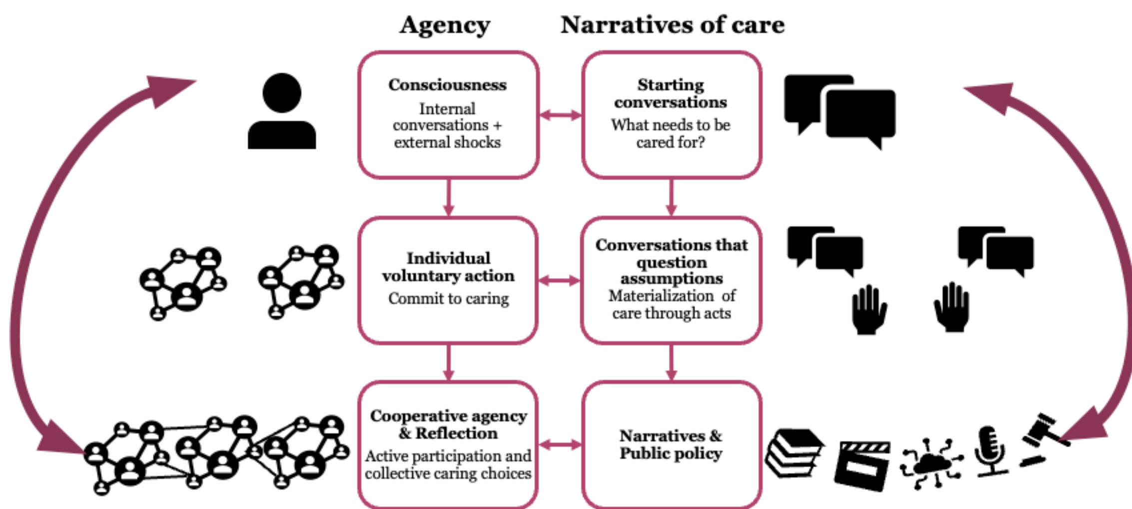

Figure 5. Agency and narratives of care.

When enough conversations coalesce in the group, we can start connecting with others to make collective caring choices (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). The third stage features *cooperative agency and reflection* and *narratives and public policy*: when we witness the actions and materialization of care among others who share the same concern, a reflective process can lead to collective action (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Cooperative agency is represented in Figure 5 through the connections among previously disconnected human groups. Conversations about care become more pervasive when strengthened by a network of visible actions derived from our conversations. That network becomes *narratives* materialized in cultural practices and products—the icons in Figure 5 represent literature, newspapers, music, movies, advertising, and social media—and *public policy*, resulting in emergent narratives of care that can flow between system levels. As we re-evaluate our position and reflect on this process, this alternative narrative based on care becomes stronger, driving us to reach out to others and drive further structural changes (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). The now stronger alternative narrative permeates conversations within an individual level, reinforcing its transmission (described by the arrows in Figure 5). Through this process, we shape our destination, as stronger narratives of care—and acts of caring themselves—can strengthen the alternative basin of attraction.

The process of social transmission of care narratives described above, depends on both an existing social network and the relatableness of the message. According to social contagion theory, just as behaviors can spread through social ties (Christakis & Fowler, 2013), narratives can also become contagious within social networks, spreading through conversations and interactions (Shiller, 2020). We propose that the process of transmission of narratives is similar to the transmission of happiness or health, where social connection and geographical closeness can help these become a collective phenomenon (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Meanwhile the content of narratives can also aid in their transmission. Narratives are adopted based on referentiality, verisimilitude, and on how relatable they feel (Bruner, 1991). Emotional resonance theory proposes that an engaging and relatable story that appeals to our emotions can move people to action, leading to the creation of movements for social change (Polletta, 2009b, 2009a). Hence, narrative transmission relies on the process of social contagion and on the connection with the message through emotional resonance.

Additionally, successful transmission of narratives of care throughout human groups is a function of the relevance of the information that they carry to our survival and how counterintuitive the narratives are

with respect to the observed world. Information arising from human interactions with the environment is processed through the filters of our cognition and is understood through interpretative schemes (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). When this information is interpreted as relevant to our survival, it can drive a change in behaviors. However, since our interpretation of the world around us is subject to biases (Kahneman, 2011), not all the information about human survival carried by narratives matches reality (Ropeik, 2010). For instance, some narratives may overstate the value of self-mastery and self-interest and their significance to our survival (Tronto, 2017). In contrast, narratives of care make evident that all beings need care at some point in their lives to survive and flourish (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). This last argument may seem counterintuitive in a world of markets and self-interest, where vulnerability is considered a sign of weakness and not a path to success (Tronto, 2017). However, since we have all been vulnerable and experienced care at some point, narratives of care can still fit our pre-existing schemas despite their counterintuitive components.

Narratives of care can become permanent features that shape the basin of attraction if their prevalence transcends isolated human groups such that they affect policies. In this sense, our framework is a call to action to different system levels. It invites individuals to act on their caring concerns as alternative narratives can empower agents to stop reproducing the practices that feed the dominant narrative (White & Epston, 1990). At the socially mediated level, it states the importance to start conversations that question assumptions and lead to action to foster well-being. At the collective level, conversations and actions add up to create alternative narratives that permeate cultural products and public policy. Alternative narratives of care can offer a way to rethink policy design, as these not only address a dominant narrative that has left us in an unsustainable state but also offer new ways of redistributing power and providing rules to care for the human and more-than-human world.

3.3.1. Phase 3 in practice: Sustainable consumption as caring, not sacrifice

Phase 3 requires reinforcing alternative narratives via visible acts of care and emphasizing sustainable consumption as an act of care, not sacrifice. Leveraging the notion of agency enables us to challenge the conception of sustainable consumption as a sacrifice and to generate alternative narratives in which sustainable consumption figures as an act of care. Reframing sustainable consumption as an act of care involves leaving aside the grim narrative of our rapacious nature and giving more weight to a narrative based on our capacity for connection (Buck, 2015). Narratives around adopting vegetarian and vegan diets illustrate this process in the case of sustainable consumption. *Re-authoring conversations* can be seen in the creation of new stories around food, based on the internal and external motives related to sustainability

and ethical issues that drive people to change their diets (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020). Moving away from the dominant narrative around carnism (Joy, 2020), these stories give new meaning to food consumption and foster new relationships with the more-than-human world. Acts of care through food consumption can also generate *re-membering conversations* that extend the wellbeing purpose of food consumption from the individual to other humans and more-than-humans, as we consider them part of our community. Under this new framework, sustainable consumption is no longer framed as a pointless sacrifice but is an act that involves reflection and the awareness of pursuing wellbeing for the self, others, and the more-than-human-world.

Successful transmission of these new narratives of care can shift the message from consumerism as a matter of individual survival to sustainable consumption as a matter of extending well-being to the more-than-human world. The dominant narrative around consumption speaks to disconnected individuals, assuming that their well-being and survival relies on self-mastery (Tronto, 2017) and on the domination of what surrounds them (Gladwin et al., 1995). In contrast, an alternative narrative poses sustainable consumption as a caring act that can lead to well-being and can be accomplished only through acknowledging our vulnerability and dependence on the more-than-human world. A higher well-being may be present in communities where social norms align with individual concerns and actions _. When acts and conversations around sustainable consumption as care rather than sacrifice start adding up, the emerging narrative can shape social norms and cultural dynamics, facilitating a double dividend where sustainable consumption leads to well-being. In this sense, our well-being and survival can be achieved by caring for the community with which we share our present and future.

3.4. The framework in action: further supporting evidence

Our framework is based on Narrative Therapy tools designed for family relations, but we argue it can be applied to broader community change. Just like families, communities are a collection of individuals sharing stories and creating narratives, and we can see how a change in narratives can shape relationships and behaviours in diverse contexts. For example, a change in the narratives around the role of women in soap operas generated wide changes in fertility rates in Brazil (La Ferrara et al., 2012). By seeing empowered, independent women, with one or no kids as the protagonists of aspirational stories, Brazilian women started making changes in their own lives. Also, the stories around outstanding economic gains that motivated people to spend more and take economic risks, were followed by stories of the moral wrong of excesses causing a decrement on consumer spending during the Great Depression (Shiller, 2020). Finally, grassroots movements that change conversations among ordinary people and manifest their concerns

through visible behaviours, have fostered wider changes like the recognition of same-sex marriage. Conversations around marriage equality led to social media posts, movies and television shows, reaching courts and churches (M. Morris, 2024). These are just some examples on how conversations and actions can build up to change narratives, as our framework proposes.

Further, several examples show how a caring version of ourselves has survived the dominant narrative of selfishness that serves the regime (Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024), spreading naturally against the odds. In fact, care and cooperation have characterized our interactions in the most unexpected situations. Local communities in war zones have shown to prioritize cooperation, strengthening relationships, and fostering selfless pro-social behaviours (Bauer et al., 2016). Also, in a game-based experiment with Colombian villagers, participants were willing to reduce their material gain, prioritizing social relationships (Cardenas et al., 2000). Humans are willing to self-sacrifice for non-kin others, particularly when we share painful experiences that generate feelings of oneness with them (Whitehouse et al., 2017). Thus, alternative narratives based on care emerge from individual concerns and from events that represent shocks to the system.

4. Conclusion

Despite the evidence regarding a variety of narratives around the human essence that show our capacity of sharing, caring, and being fair, a narrative regarding humanity's selfish and extractive nature prevails and shapes current social-ecological relationships. This narrative acts as a self-fulfilled prophecy, as it is reinforced by the current environmental crisis. However, this hopeless narrative is incomplete, can paralyze us and lead us to inaction. In this paper we offer a theoretical framework that can generate a change towards narratives of care. The emergence and transmission of narratives of care can contribute to all the systemic changes needed to move toward a more sustainable basin of attraction. This implies questioning the assumptions that support this unsustainable version of ourselves and create possibilities for change by fostering narratives based on our caring capacity. The new scenarios emerging from this alternative narrative of care can be reinforced by strengthening agency and fostering its transmission from individuals to their closest social groups, communities, and society.

Our paper calls the general public to act their concerns about caring for others and the more-than-human world. As we incorporate care in our core narrative, we must manifest our concerns through our conversations and instantiate them through visible acts of care. The more we engage in these acts of care and the more we see such manifestations of care in the environment, the stronger the emergent narrative

will become. As narratives of care become stronger, they can reach the level of policy, and policy, in turn, can change individual interactions and behaviors. To illustrate this, sustainable consumption can be framed as an act of care rather than a sacrifice. Consuming sustainably becomes a matter of extending survival and wellbeing to other humans and to the more-than-human world. When framed in this way, sustainable consumption becomes a gratifying and satisfactory way of living. Visible acts of sustainable consumption can spark new conversations within and among human groups strengthening this narrative.

Our framework contributes to the debates around the role of narratives in sustainability in two unique ways. First, it introduces the role of narratives of care in shaping more sustainable social environmental relationships. Second, it features the contagious power of acts and conversations around care in community contexts, where these can spread locally to then reach narratives at higher levels.

Due to its flexibility, this framework can be of interest to policymakers and content producers who are seeking to achieve the sociocultural changes needed to move towards more sustainable scenarios. Given that narrative transmission is both a top-down and bottom-up process, policy makers can also foster the spread of narratives around sustainability and care by creating policies based on the assumption of humanity's caring nature. Media content producers are also called to spread this narrative and to question an unsustainable and selfish human nature, strengthening alternative narratives and new social norms.

Our paper comes with some limitations. We would like to clarify that, although a change in narratives can aid in fostering sociocultural changes, it is not the silver bullet to achieve sustainability. Also, we are not proposing a planetary-scale solution, but a solution at the community level that expands through physical demonstrations of care. Our article opens the possibility of questioning a given for granted narrative that underlies neoliberal dynamics, serving as the basis for further changes. Major changes in public policy, legislation, infrastructure, and economic dynamics must accompany and facilitate this narrative change. We also acknowledge that this theoretical framework, although promising, is based on theoretical insights and has not been tested further than the example included regarding sustainable consumption.

Although this framework currently relies on theoretical insights, it offers a basis for future empirical validation. Empirical evidence and validation to strengthen this framework can be gathered through different approaches, opening the door to creativity in the development of methodologies. Interviews, journals, storytelling, and group discussions are just some examples of the possible approaches to gather current and alternative stories. Yet, our framework guides but not prescribes specific methods, given that these may vary depending on the context. Methods to exploring dominant narratives, identifying the

assumptions behind them, challenging those assumptions, generating and spreading new narratives may be developed based on a specific belief system and culture. Again, systemic barriers must be acknowledged in the process, as narrative changes may not act fast enough to overcome them, slowing action.

In this sense, the framework can be applied to a wide diversity of sustainability-related issues. For instance, future empirical studies may include the exploration of narratives around environmentally impactful practices such as food consumption. These could find and question assumptions around food, understand the meaning of care in these narratives, and explore the possibilities to expand this meaning to the more-than-human world through reflection tools such as diaries and in-depth interviews. Other studies could explore how narratives around care have materialized through actions that can lead to sustainable futures in the community setting, through case studies and ethnography. Additionally, our framework could be applied to fostering narratives around caring masculinities to achieve gender equity and sustainable households, through experiments and interviews.

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Chapter 2: Expanding the meaning of care for sustainable food consumption[2]

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1. Introduction

Care has the potential to reshape our relationship with humans and more-than-humans (Lorek et al., 2023; Moriggi et al., 2020). Current food systems are extractive, treating food as a commodity, and one of the main drivers of climate change (Steffen et al., 2018; Vivero-Pol, 2017). This approach privileges the economic gains of food systems over human nutrition and the planetary wellbeing required to support them. Food systems require an urgent intervention, centring care as a path towards sustainability.

There is sufficient evidence on the role of care in affecting change in food systems, such as household food practices (Godin & Langlois, 2021; Paddock, 2017), the impacts of the adoption of vegetarian and vegan diets in the family/social context (Beverland et al., 2015; Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Oliver, 2023), the pursuit of better food choices (Aertsens et al., 2009; Cairns et al., 2013; Dholakia & Shukul, 2012; Verain et al., 2015), and the barriers faced when trying to do so (Cairns et al., 2018; Dixon & Isaacs, 2013; Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Yet, the possibility of alternative narratives that could expand the meaning of care to promote sustainable food consumption remains unexplored. Understanding how these sustainable food consumption narratives arise and are fostered is the focus of our research.

In this study, we explore the current meaning of care in food narratives and find alternative narratives that can aid in its expansion, promoting sustainable food consumption. We understand care as: "A species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and 'repair' our world, so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p.40). Also, we understand sustainable food consumption as choosing and consuming foods that have lower impacts on the environment, are healthy and nutritious, are affordable and support local economies, guarantee fair working conditions for producers, respect animal welfare, and consider sociocultural dynamics (Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022).

We apply a narrative change framework proposed by Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025) to the narratives collected through 22 storybooks and life story interviews (R. Atkinson, 2012). This framework explores the possibility of narrative change and emerges from Narrative Therapy (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990), Narrative Psychology (Bruner, 1987, 1991, 2010), the Ethics of Care (Gibson-Graham,

[2] This article was sent and is under revision by the journal Ecology and Society.

2011; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto & Fisher, 1990) and Complex Adaptive Systems Theory (Levin et al., 2013; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). The framework proposes three phases for narrative change including identifying dominant narratives, creating possibilities for change, and reinforcing new scenarios. To expand the meaning of care in the narrative space, we use this framework to find alternative narratives and create possibilities for change. We approach the narrative expansion through the movement in three axes that are related to care and sustainability 1) scope, so the meaning of care through food includes other humans and the more-than-human world, 2) connectedness, so it acknowledges the interconnection that underlies the well-being of food systems, and 3) identity, so it allows for self-expression and cultivates respect for diversity.

We find three alternative narratives about *connecting with emotions, finding commonalities*, and *ending the transmission of suffering*, that can serve as the basis for further research, social marketing campaigns, and public policy seeking to promote sustainable food consumption. Finally, it invites the reader to start conversations and act on their concerns as the first step to invite others to change their own narratives.

This study contributes to the academic discussion on the role of narratives in creating sustainable futures (Beckert, 2016; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). It opens possibilities for structuring narratives around food in a more inclusive, connected, empathic and respectful way.

It also contributes to cultural changes, as it poses sustainable food consumption as an act of care for others. Self-narratives where we portray important aspects of our identity demand us to maintain coherence through actions (Polkinghorne, 1988). Our study shows the presence of shared narratives where participants describe themselves as being sensitive, prone to empathizing with others, finding commonalities, and acting to end suffering. These can become the basis for an expanded meaning of care that invites action. When others, who share the same concerns, see these actions, the narrative gets stronger and the acts of care can multiply.

Finally, our study also offers pathways to address the tensions between the sociocultural, economic, and environmental spheres (Béné et al., 2019; Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022), since sustainable food consumption behaviors can become socio culturally accepted when justified as acts of care that respond to our human nature.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we present the theoretical framework that guides our work, encompassing the concepts of care and sustainable diets, the role of narratives in social-ecological systems, and the narrative space of care. In section 3, we describe the methods used to gather the stories of 22 participants and we give an overview of the framework used for the analysis. In section 4, we present the results of the story books and life story interviews following the phases proposed by this framework. In section 5, we explore current dominant narratives around food consumption, analyze the sustainability concerns that contradict those narratives, explore the tensions arising when acting on those concerns,

propose three alternative narratives related to sustainable food consumption, and identify the changes required for these to succeed. Finally, in section 6 we suggest that each of these alternative narratives based on care invite us to create contexts where we can materialize our concerns. A narrative about connecting with emotions can help us move towards self-expression, in a context of empathy and respect. A narrative about finding commonalities and expanding the pack can help us move towards inclusion, in a context where we are willing to recognize others as full partners in interactions. A narrative about ending the transmission of suffering can help us move towards interconnection, in a context that recognizes vulnerabilities as an opportunity to co-become.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The meaning of care

Care is fundamentally a relational concept centred on the concern for enhancing the wellbeing of others, our wellbeing, and how we enact this concern (Tronto, 1998). In our study, we begin with Tronto and Fisher's definition of care:

> A species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and 'repair' our world, so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web. (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p.40)

Humans are a caring species because empathy, altruism, and cooperation are integral to our shared nature (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Gilligan, 2014). We are caring animals, and relationships are central to our lives (Tronto, 2017). All humans experience being recipients and givers of care at some point, and the effects of care are evident in its presence and absence (Gilligan, 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2017). Despite the importance of care to life itself, patriarchal narratives have either made care invisible or framed it as a time-consuming, gender-related issue that can be resolved by the women of the family or transacted in the market (Gilligan, 1993; Tronto, 2017). Hence, this fundamental trait we share as a species has been left out of the dominant narrative, which instead praises autonomy, self-centredness, and disconnection.

Care necessarily goes beyond self-interest and requires commitment to meeting the needs of a complex "we" and expanding our community of fate through our actions (Carugati & Levi, 2021; de la Cadena, 2019; Shaw et al., 2016; Tronto & Fisher, 1990). The complex "we" refers to the multiple species and systems that need each other to exist and become (de la Cadena, 2019). Caring for the complex "we" means extending our solidarity beyond our closest social group to the rest of humanity and the more-than-human world (de la Cadena, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2011; Levi, 2020). Our ability to engage and form relationships early in life (Brothers, 1989) demonstrates our innate capacity for empathy. Our capacity for selflessness

and solidarity is also shown through our willingness to help non-kin individuals in times of crisis (Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024; Solnit, 2010).

To expand the scope of our care capacity beyond self-interest, we must start considering other humans and more-than-humans as part of our community. This requires recognizing that we belong to a “complex life-sustaining web” (Tronto, 2017) or an extended community of fate, with which we share a common present and future (Levi, 2020). In this sense, as we care for the more-than-human world and expand our community of fate, we move further from the binary division that places “us” separate and superior to “others” (de la Cadena, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2011).

Moreover, caring relationships that emerge from this complex life-sustaining web require dependency and connectedness to maintain our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. Care cannot be reduced to a one-time choice or an isolated action. Instead, due to our ongoing interactions within this complex life-sustaining web, care involves acknowledging that our choices and actions constantly impact others. In this sense, interconnectedness implies committing to certain obligations and responsibilities with each other. These responsibilities can be specific to each relationship, or collective when impacting the lives or fulfilling the needs of a larger community (Collins, 2015).

Care is characterized by the intention and actions to fulfill the interests of those in need (Pettersen, 2012). Although caring involves knowing how to care, it also demands focusing on the needs of the other, respecting their individuality, and avoiding imposing our interests. Since caring sometimes involves a power imbalance between the *care giver* and the *care receiver*, negative outcomes can emerge when the relationship minimizes and takes advantage of one of the parts, overlooking the satisfaction of their needs (Tronto, 1998). Acknowledging the identity and needs of each party becomes fundamental for respecting the “otherness” in caring relationships that are nurturing.

The relevance of care to the survival and wellbeing of humans and more-than-humans is illustrated by food systems. Currently, food is treated as a commodity (Vivero-Pol, 2017) governed by transactional market dynamics and stripped of its relational essence. As its economic value overshadows its nourishing and caring purposes, those implicated in the complex web that sustains food production and consumption are negatively impacted. The lack of care in food systems has led to health, environmental, and social issues, that risk their future along with the survival of humans and other non-human species (Steffen et al., 2018; Willett et al., 2019). We turn to the role of care in sustainable food consumption next.

2.2. Sustainable diets: Caring through food

Humanity depends on the wellbeing of the more-than-human world for food production, and transforming current unsustainable food systems is one of the main ways we can foster planetary health (Capra & Jakobsen, 2017; Lade et al., 2020; O’Connor & Kenter, 2019; Steffen et al., 2018). The Sustainable Diets Framework (Burlingame, 2012; Gussow & Clancy, 1986; Mason & Lang, 2017)

illustrates how this transformation would look like in dietary terms. It calls for dietary guidelines that go beyond human nutrition, to include the complexity of a wider system (Burlingame, 2012; Gussow & Clancy, 1986; Mason & Lang, 2017). Under this framework, sustainable diets are defined as those diets that aim at guaranteeing food and nutrition security for the human population, integrating and respecting sociocultural traditions related to food, being accessible and supporting sustainable food economies, assuring fair conditions for producers, and protecting the well-being of the more-than-human world and the health of the Earth Systems now and in the future (Burlingame, 2012; Johnston et al., 2014).

At the plate level, sustainable diets assure the appropriate amount of calories needed by each person, include a diversity of plant-based foods and whole grains, have low amounts of animal-based foods, and avoid saturated fats, refined grains, added sugars and highly processed foods (Willett et al., 2019). The environmental and health benefits of plant-based, low-meat diets have been widely studied, encompassing lower rates of cardiovascular disease (Esselstyn et al., 2014; H. Kim et al., 2019), reductions in premature mortality (H. Kim et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2003; Springmann et al., 2018), and reductions in greenhouse gas emissions (Bajželj et al., 2014; Lade et al., 2020; Macdiarmid et al., 2012).

However, healthy and environmentally friendly diets are not always consistent with context specific sociocultural dynamics, generating tensions and making the transition towards these diets even more challenging (Béné et al., 2019). For instance, in some contexts family traditions and emotionally relevant relationships are prioritized over the health, environmental, and animal well-being impacts of the diet (Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022). In the path towards sustainable diets, we must acknowledge that food consumption is an act loaded with meanings and symbols, shared by a social group embedded in specific cultural norms (Beardsworth & Keil, 1996). Hence, considering that specific cultural contexts determine what is good–or not–to eat (Harris, 1985), food can be a source of inclusion or exclusion within human groups, allowing for the strengthening or weakening of relationships (Fischler, 2011). A transformation of the diets towards sustainability must acknowledge the sociocultural dynamics underlying food consumption, and foster changes that integrate these dynamics and balance the tensions with other dimensions (Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022).

Fostering narratives based on the ethics of care could be a way of integrating sociocultural dynamics and balancing the tensions with other sustainability dimensions of food systems. As an example, Alternative Food Networks that recognize the interdependencies within nature have set as their goal to move beyond producing food only for humans, and have started producing food for the more-than-human world as well (Beacham, 2018). Food produced under these ethics of care is often shared within the community, leading to stronger relationships, and opening the possibility for a narrative based on caring for the more-than-human world that flows within human social groups (Giraud, 2021; Sovová et al., 2021). By enacting an ethics of care in which humans belong and depend of a complex "we", Earth's systems can keep nourishing

people, while people can nourish Earth's systems in return (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; de la Cadena, 2019).

2.3. Narratives and social-ecological systems

Narratives can shape the interactions within social-ecological systems, and could aid in changing how we interact with the more-than-human world (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). The stories we tell guide our actions and give sense to the world around us (Polkinghorne, 1988). In a circular process, narratives can influence behaviors, and behaviors can validate or question narratives (Bruner, 1991). When narratives add up and go viral, socioeconomic changes can happen (Shiller, 2020). A change in narratives could help our current social-ecological systems change their dynamics and move towards a more sustainable state.

Social-ecological systems are complex adaptive systems (Levin et al., 2013; Preiser et al., 2018). Complex adaptive systems are systems capable of reorganizing and evolving to adapt to a changing environment (Holland, 1992). In complex adaptive systems, individual behaviors – like producing and consuming - aggregate and organize into a collective whole – such as the economy-, from which complex patterns and phenomena emerge (Mitchell, 2009). In this sense, lower-scale transformational changes can foster large-scale transformational change (Folke et al., 2010). System interventions focused on the elements that attract actors' behaviour, could lead to wider behavioral changes (Kuhmonen, 2017).

In social-ecological systems, narratives work as social attractors, shaping interactions and basins of attraction (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). An attractor is a point or set of points towards which the system evolves and accumulates (Milnor, 1985). Basins of attraction are the space that comprise the trajectories of elements that move towards attractors (Nusse & Yorke, 1996). Social-ecological systems move, organize, and stabilize around basins of attraction (Holling, 1973). Narratives are social attractors that carry norms, values, meanings, and can influence the way in which societies organize and process information (Bruner, 1991, 2010). Therefore, narratives can shape interactions within social-ecological systems generating changes in behaviors, society, and culture (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021).

A change in narratives can guide the self-organization dynamics of the system and shape a new basin of attraction (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). When the system is not able to self-organize around the previous attractor or regime, it re-organizes around a different one (Folke, 2006). Since narratives work as social attractors, narratives of care could serve as new attractors if they spread along diverse human socio-cultural systems (Otto et al., 2020). Narratives of care present transformational pathways and allow us to visualize sustainable futures, motivating action toward these futures (Beckert, 2016; Milkoreit, 2017; van der Leeuw, 2020).

2.4. The narrative space of care

Based on the literature on care exposed above, expanding the meaning of care to foster sustainability must imply including other humans and the more-than-human world as part of our community of fate (Levi, 2020), and understanding the interdependencies present in a complex life-sustaining web (Tronto & Fisher, 1990), while acknowledging the diverse needs and respecting the otherness of the members of this web (Tronto, 1998). Hence, if we were to locate narratives of care in a multidimensional space (see figure 1), we propose that, to foster more sustainable scenarios, narratives of care should move in the axes of 1) scope, towards expanding and including others as part of our community; 2) connectedness, towards increasing our awareness of the interconnections around us and our ability to see the "bigger picture"; and 3) identity, towards acknowledging and respecting uniqueness and self-expression. We find that care components like recognition (Fraser, 2001), vulnerability (Murthy, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Tronto, 2017), as well as empathy and respect for others (Campelia, 2017; Schirmer et al., 2012), can aid in these movement.

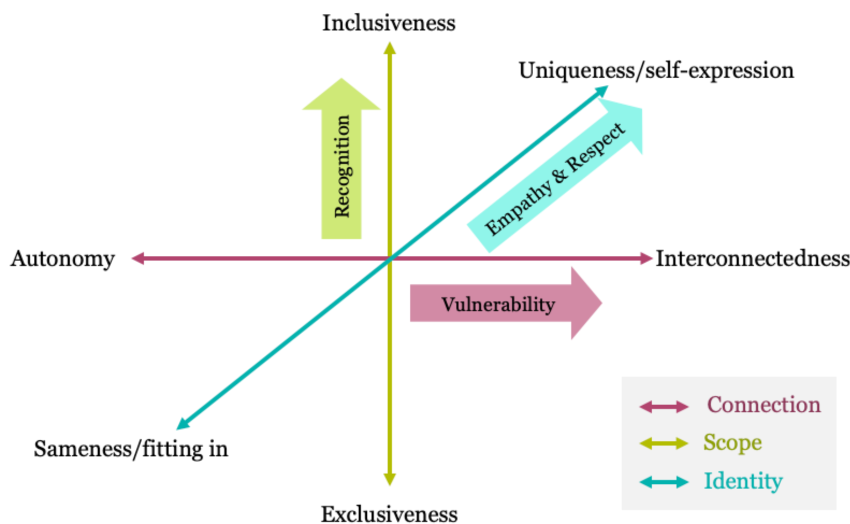

Figure 1. 3 axes of the narratives of care in a multidimensional space.

2.4.1. *Scope: Who is part of my community of fate?*

The *scope* axis comprises the concepts of *inclusion* vs. *exclusion*, which are understood from the concept of Communities of Fate. Communities of fate are those communities with which we believe we share a common present and future (Levi, 2020). Whether it is a small group of people or a broad community that encompasses the more-than-human world, "its members are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of those with whom they believe their destinies, and their descendants' destinies, are entwined" (Carugati & Levi, 2021, p.3). Communities of fate can emerge from crises, are characterized by a "feeling of horizontal

interconnectedness", and can foster collective action to overcome threatening challenges (Baehr, 2005, p.182).

Exclusion refers to rejecting or not allowing individuals to join a group, limiting their capacity to participate in internal decision-making processes, and overshadowing their rights by prioritizing the rights and wellbeing of the individuals who do belong to the group (Byrne, 2005). *Exclusive* communities limit the possibility of belonging to the group to blood ties, race, nation, beliefs, gender and sexual preference, socioeconomic level, or species (Levi, 2020). Dominant communities define and protect themselves by the exclusion of others (G. A. Akerlof & Kranton, 2000). Exclusive communities set higher barriers to consider someone as "family" (Odell, 2019). A completely *exclusive* community of fate restricts its scope to members that share specific characteristics, expects reciprocity to maintain group dynamics, and assumes that its present and future only depends on its group members.

We understand *inclusion* from the concept of '*self-expansion and inclusion of others in self'* (Aron & Aron, 1997), and from the concept of *self-transcendence* (Frankl, 1966). *Self-expansion* is the human desire to enhance our capacities through loving connections and close relationships. Since relationships are the main path to self-expansion, in these interactions we 'include others in the self' by incorporate important aspects of others as our own, blurring the line between 'self' and 'other' (Aron et al., 2022). *Self-transcendence* is the quality of human existence to be open to a world full of other beings that can give meaning to our lives (Frankl, 1966). *Inclusion* refers to welcoming individuals to become part of our group – and ourselves – under the premise of achieving wellbeing by interacting and relying on each other. It implies that individuals who belong to a community should enjoy equal treatment and the protection of their rights (Liamputtong, 2022). Inclusive communities try to remove barriers to consider someone as "family." In our framework, a completely *inclusive* community expands beyond humans and its 'inclusion of others in self' reaches the more-than-human world. An inclusive community acts in solidarity and compassion to all the living systems of Earth, regardless of the possibility of reciprocity (Carugatti & Levi, 2021).

A narrative can move within the *scope* axis through *recognition* (Fraser, 2001). Recognition refers to acknowledging the status of group members as full partners in interactions. Misrecognition means that individuals are being deprived from participating as peers (Fraser, 2001). The more a system recognizes others as participating peers, barriers are removed, and individuals actively reach out to a wider community, moving towards inclusion.

2.4.2. Connectedness: How do we interact (or not) in a complex life-sustaining web?

The connectedness axis involves the concepts of *autonomy and individual goals* vs *interconnectedness and collective goals*. These concepts derive from the description of individualist societies as those that

prioritize the pursue of personal goals, and collectivist societies as those leaned towards communal goals (Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). While aspects such as self-expression and fitting-in are sometimes included within these theories, we consider them in a separate axis since addressing individual needs is an important part of caregiving (Tronto, 1998), and we disagree with the idea of a collectivist society that cannot allow for self-expression.

Autonomy or independency refers to an orientation where each person is inherently separate from the rest and must achieve the goal of independence by following their own thoughts, feelings, and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Under this perspective, self-discipline, hard work, and individual talents are the keys to success and self-pride (Henrich, 2020). Also, since it adopts an 'experiential I perspective', it promotes self-protective goals and sees decisions involving others as zero-sum games (Grossmann et al., 2017). In this axis, the edge of *Autonomy* involves seeing humans as self-mastering beings that can improve themselves constantly to reach their *individual goals*, without the help of others (Henrich, 2020; Tronto, 2017).

On the other hand, *interconnectedness or interdependency* refers to viewing the self as part of a whole that achieves common goals through following the thoughts, feelings, and needs of others. Under this perspective, the self becomes more meaningful and complete through its relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Also, since it promotes an 'observer perspective', it allows having a bigger-picture view and making decisions through cooperation (Grossmann et al., 2017). Collective action towards these goals can imply acting selflessly and allows for group pride around the accomplishments (R. Akerlof, 2016). In this axis, the edge of *interconnectedness* implies that humans can only flourish through relationships and rely on each other to improve their lives (Cottam, 2019; Tronto, 1998).

A narrative moves within the *connectedness* axis through *vulnerability*. All humans are vulnerable, fragile, and need to be cared for at some point in their lives (Tronto, 2017). Our vulnerability makes relationships essential to survival and is at the base of creating significant relationships (Murthy, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). When a system fosters self-mastery and masculine traits such as being emotionally stoic and independent (Gilligan, 2014; Tronto, 2017), it moves towards the autonomy edge. When it fosters vulnerability, dependency, and emotional intimacy (Gilligan, 2014), it moves to interconnectedness.

2.4.3. Identity: How to define ourselves and the otherness?

Finally, the identity axis involves the concepts of *sameness and fitting in* vs. *Uniqueness and self-expression*. A variety of cognitive and emotional processes are influenced by each person's way to engage with culture. In a culture that fosters self-enhancement – which refers to overestimating the uniqueness of one's own positive attributes – it will be easier for a person who seeks independence and uniqueness to adapt (Kitayama et al., 1997). In contrast, in a culture where self-criticism and self-effacing prevail - which refer to making sure that one's actions are accepted by the group and rated as "average"– sameness and

interdependency could make belonging easier (Gaertner et al., 2012). However, we analyze uniqueness and sameness separately from independence and interdependence, since we would like to contest the idea that striving for communal goals and seeing dependencies within a system rules out the possibility of uniqueness.

Sameness and fitting-in involves highlighting commonalities and rejecting differences when interacting with others (Gullestad, 2002). This concept implies adjusting individual identity to fit under the expectations of the group and adopting the same principles to gain peer esteem (G. A. Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; R. Akerlof, 2016). In the edge of *Sameness and fitting-in* members of the group seek to fit together and share the same ideas and characteristics, while showing total conformity with an established order and no tolerance to minority groups (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

In contrast, *uniqueness and self-expression* relates to how people difference themselves from the group through specific characteristics and personality traits. The cultivation of these unique characteristics is aimed at a clear definition of the self, fostering self-enhancement as well as the adoption of diverse principles for the sake of positive self-esteem. Hence, it fosters differentiation, individuality and non-conformity (R. Akerlof, 2016; Henrich, 2020). Since individual traits and differentiation from the group are valued, this is linked to a growing respect and recognition toward foreigners, the 2SLGBTQI+ community, and a promotion of gender equality (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). In the edge of *uniqueness and self-expression* people are encouraged to cultivate and express their individuality, and while non-conformity is allowed, respect towards diversity is required.

A narrative moves along the *identity* axis through *empathy* and *respect*. *Empathy* is a practice that seeks to engage and deepen relationships with others. Empathy is relational, aimed at coming to know how others feel, and at understanding their life experience (Campelia, 2017). It is involved in the process of taking others' perspectives, improving the relations with people outside the group (Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Vescio et al., 2003). In this sense, empathy allows people to find common ground despite having different individual traits (Read, 2021). Respect refers to treating people as autonomous agents whose interests are taken seriously and are valued. Respecting someone involves giving their ideas and experiences the importance we give to our own regardless of how they differ (Schirmer et al., 2012). When a human system assumes that everyone's needs and experiences must be the same, it moves to the *sameness and fitting-in edge*. When it fosters deep connection with diverse identities and values everyone's agency it moves towards *uniqueness and self-expression*.

3. Methods

This study followed a qualitative methodology to explore the meaning of care in narratives related to food, and the possibility of expanding this meaning to include the more-than-human world. Our methodology used a narrative research design to explore human experiences through the study of stories

(Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986c). In these stories, the self, the community, and culture, converge (Clandinin, 2007), since narratives and meanings are co-constructed through relationships (Andrews et al., 2008). Given that food consumption is part of our personal stories and identity (Shankar et al., 2001, 2009), narrative research allowed us to understand the meaning of care in the narratives that flow through the relationships and experiences around food. To do so, we used document analysis tools, such as storybooks (Billups, 2021), and the life story interview method (R. Atkinson, 1998, 2007, 2012), which allowed us to gather information about the life experiences of participants.

3.1. Participants

In this study, 22 people filled online storybooks and participated in online interviews. Participants' place of residence during the fieldwork was Bogota (14 participants) and Medellin (8 participants), Colombia. They were between the ages of 23 and 66, with an average of 37.8 years of age. Most participants identified as women (14 participants), more than a third (8 participants) identified as men, and no participants reported a different gender identity. Regarding their highest educational degree achieved, most reported having a bachelor's degree (10 participants), followed by those who reported having a graduate diploma (7 participants), those who reported completing high school (3 participants), and those who have a trades and skills certificate/diploma (2 participants).

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling has been successfully employed in studies using a similar research design, were interactions and social dynamics around a specific topic are prioritized (Noy, 2008). In our case, having participants willing to share their family food stories was a priority. Some participants belonged to the same family, allowing us to gather multiple versions of the story.

3.2. Ethical considerations

All materials and procedures used in this project were reviewed and received approval by the research ethics system at the University of Waterloo (#45726) on November 29th, 2023. After approval, participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique, and were provided with an invitation poster with information about the study. If they showed interest, an informed consent was provided to each participant specifying the purpose of the study, the possibility to opt out, a description of the research process, the duration of the interviews, how researchers will handle information to guarantee anonymity and data confidentiality, as well as the principal researcher contact information for questions. No names or images with identifiable information were included in this article. All storybooks, audios, and transcripts were stored in a password-protected folder in the cloud and were anonymized to protect the privacy of participants.

3.3. Data collection

Data collection for this research involved completing storybooks and conducting life story interviews. Participants were given a digital storybook comprised of two chapters to prepare for the interview, which contained guiding questions about their food stories during childhood (chapter 1) and adulthood (chapter 2). We chose this data collection technique since documents and artifacts, such as the storybooks used for this study, are considered points of evidence that can capture the human experience, allowing to corroborate participant's narratives (Billups, 2021).

After completing the storybooks, participants were asked to join a life story interview, where their book was explored through open-ended questions (Atkinson, 1998, 2012). Questions for this interview were based on a narrative-change framework developed to promote narratives for sustainability (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025), which incorporates social basins of attraction in complex adaptive systems (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021), the Ethics of Care (Tronto, 1998, 2017), Narrative Therapy (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990) and Narrative Psychology(Bruner, 1991, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1988). For more detailed information about this framework please see Annex 1. The first phase of this framework aided in exploring dominant narratives (past and current), and in identifying meanings and assumptions linked to care and food. The second phase of the framework helped in questioning assumptions linked to care and food, in identifying unique outcomes that can serve as the basis for new stories, and in creating more sustainable narratives around food (see figure 2).

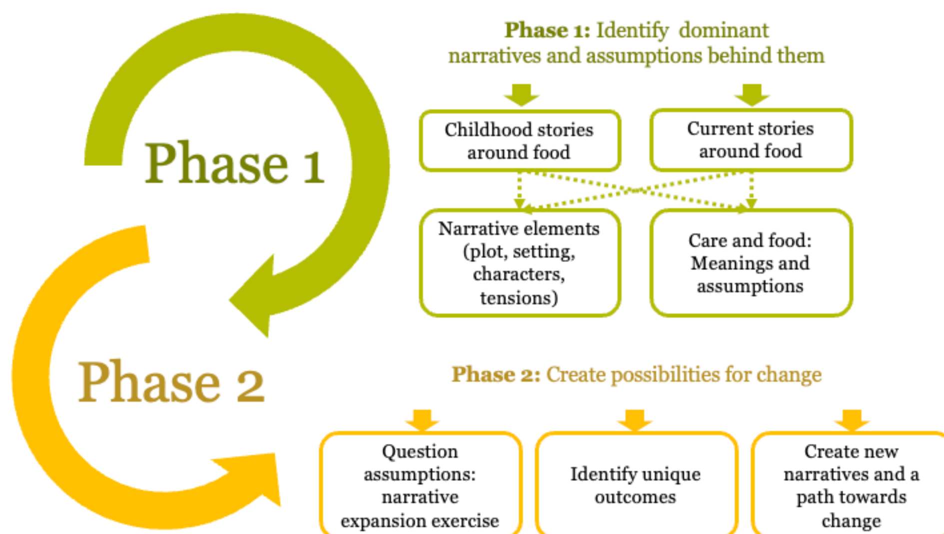

Figure 2. Application of the narrative-change framework

To question assumptions, we developed a narrative expansion exercise by creating nine pairs of statements based on the axes mentioned in section 2.4. In this exercise, participants had to move a slider between two statements according to their past and present food stories. Depending on the closeness to the statements, a number between 0 and 7 was assigned. The nine pairs of statements were presented twice

during the interview (see Figure 3), first after exploring childhood stories and later after exploring current food stories. Participants were invited to reflect on the role of care in the movement within these axes. The purpose of this was to generate awareness on how the scope (exclusion-inclusion), identity (uniqueness-sameness), and connectedness (autonomy-interconnection) present in childhood and current stories has moved over time. The term sustainability was not mentioned to avoid social desirability bias (Cerri et al., 2019).

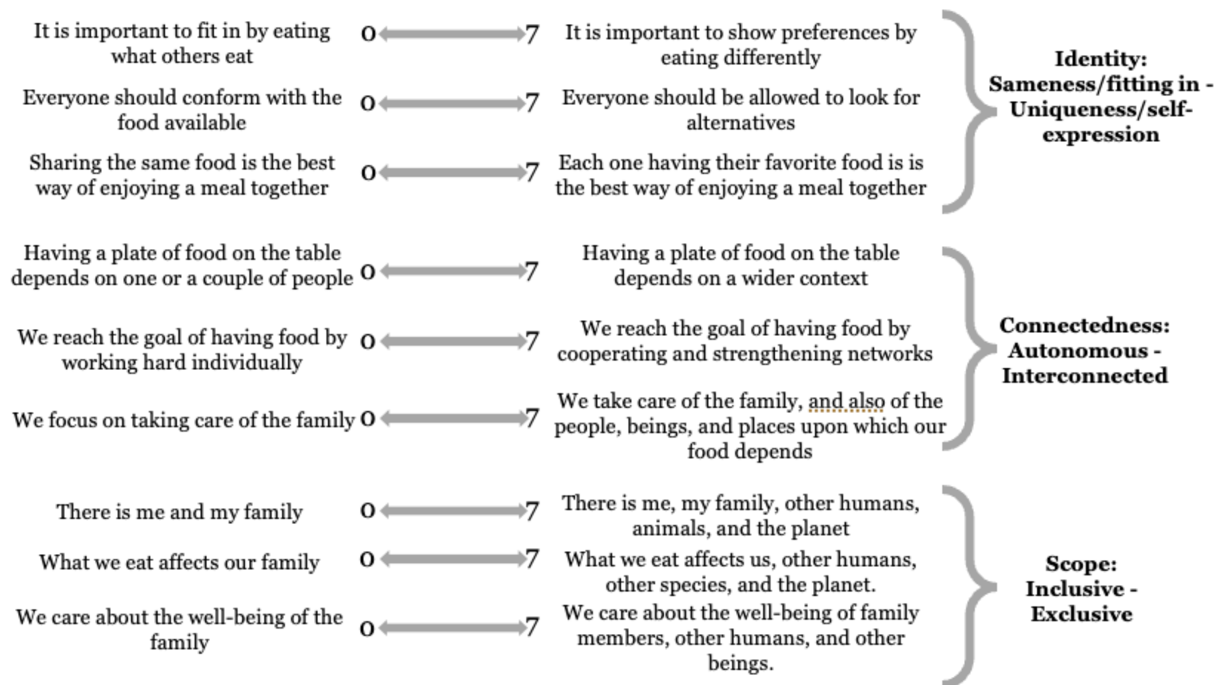

Figure 3. Narrative expansion exercise including statements about identity, connectedness, and scope.

The quotes and stories gathered through the interviews were added by the researchers to the storybooks. We integrated 1009 pages of interview transcripts in 22 story books, resulting in 213 pages of stories. To corroborate that this final version of the story books corresponded to participants' experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988), we used the member checking validity strategy (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which consisted on sending participants their story books back, and asking for feedback. The analysis started only after having participants' approval of this collaborative version of their stories.

3.4. Data analysis

The analysis was performed over the collaborative version of the storybooks with the assistance of NVivo. The coding procedure started with a pregiven set of codes that emerged from the framework proposed by Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025) and where incorporated as the following topics in the interview guide 1) Narratives around food and care while growing up (followed by narrative expansion exercise), 2) Current narratives around food and care (followed by narrative expansion exercise), 3) Unique outcomes as stories that show how they care for other humans and more-than-humans and serve as alternative narratives. Within these general pregiven codes, inductively generated codes started emerging and were populated through several reads of the story books (Campbell et al., 2013). Analysis followed the holistic-content perspective proposed by Lieblich (1998), which starts with several global reads of the story, followed by a global impression, and the identification of major themes that relate to the whole context of the narrative (Lieblich, 1998). Additionally, we analyzed the information under the framework proposed by Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025), by identifying the dominant narrative and its assumptions, finding statements that question assumptions, finding unique outcomes, and identifying alternative narratives.

Analysis of the narrative expansion exercise was done by using descriptive statistics on the data gathered. This allowed us to create a chart that shows the expansion of narratives in the three different axes of identity, connectedness, and scope.

4. Results

4.1. Dominant narratives around care and food

4.1.1. Caring through food during childhood

Dominant narratives during participants' childhood portrayed food predominantly as a motive for sharing and family union. For most, it was a moment of collaboration and enjoyment, where everyone gathered to share more than a meal: "*It meant everything because it was the time to sit at the table with the family and put a stop to the stress of work or school… even if there wasn't much food or resources to eat, what we had was prepared and eaten with a lot of love."* During weekends and special holidays, food represented the opportunity to strengthening the bonds with extended family: *"On Saturdays we would meet at my grandmother's house with my father's entire family (there were about 40 of us) and we would eat sancocho that she prepared over a firewood. It was a space where all the cousins were together, and it made us all much closer."*

The nutritional function of food was only a concern for the adult members of the family or caregivers. In the case of kids, eating was an unimportant but required activity and could become an enjoyable or loathful moment based on food's taste. While some foods and preparations addressed both taste and nutrition, most foods considered healthy were less attractive: *"My grandparents had a strict rule: we had to eat everything they served us, even if there were vegetables or foods we didn't like. They made us*

sit at the table until we finished everything on our plate." To some participants, this implied being forced to eat and getting punished when not: *"Until I was 10, my relationship with food was based on hate. Eating was always a torment, a fight… it was someone yelling at me and forcing me to eat."* Not eating at family meals or eating differently could become a motive of conflict, as this not only contradicted the underlying rules that guided family dynamics, but also disrupted the idea of sharing *a meal that is good for everyone*.

Food structured the day, giving a sense of security and predictability: "*We had to have breakfast at 7:00 am and lunch at 12 pm, that was the law. We had breakfast, went out to play, and knew we had to be back at 12 pm because we knew mom had already prepared lunch. At night, we played until 5 pm in the afternoon and came back for dinner."* Siting at the table became a way of reinstating one's love and belonging to the group: *"I also remember that we would sit at the table with our cousins. So, family lunches on Sundays were full of children, music, and preparations that were sometimes very simple, but filled with a lot of love."*

The dominant voices in these stories belonged to mothers and grandmothers who decided the ingredients, preparations, and rules around food. Their presence not only guaranteed a plate for everyone on the table, but also the transmission of traditional foods from one generation to the next: *"The most important person in these decisions was my grandmother, who was the one who spoiled us with food when we were little and who was always there for us."* Mothers where in charge of guaranteeing the availability of healthy and nutrient rich foods, and for teaching eating habits that would last for life: *"My mom was in charge of making healthy food, if it wasn't for her, we would only eat junk food."* Grandmothers went beyond nourishment to pamper their families with tasty dishes, that in many cases incorporated sweets and sugar: *"Grandma would sometimes spoil us with sweet things… Whenever she saw me, she would say: "Come here, have a bite" and she would always give me something like roast chicken with panela [sugar cane]."*

In these childhood narratives, care through food meant providing or forcing healthy foods and avoiding unhealthy ones, to promote a visible wellbeing within the family. Healthy foods, understood as vegetables and animal protein sources that were known traditionally for their health benefits, where offered to participants despite their preferences: *"I never thought that I was drinking a liver smoothie because it had a lot of iron... I just drank it reluctantly, but I didn't associate it with something important for my health."* In this scenario, being cared for not necessarily generated positive feelings: "*there were times when I had to eat a lot of vegetables, and it was super disgusting, and my parents told me that I couldn't leave the table until I finished everything on the plate."* In this struggle to get participants to eat healthy unappealing foods, unhealthy and tasty foods were actively avoided within the family: *"as a child I always wanted to eat sweets, chocolates and things like that, but wanting to eat healthy came into conflict with that."* Cooking at home and choosing farm to table ingredients was part of a careful preparation that could

guarantee wellbeing. Hence, the idea of wellbeing was associated with eating high quantities of homemade food and was represented in a vigorous appearance, rosy cheeks, and rarely getting sick: *"In my family, eating well was synonymous with eating everything and eating a lot, overlooking the amount of carbohydrates. The more you ate, the better your health would be. Eating a lot guaranteed to be well nourished."*

The meaning of caring through food also incorporated emotional elements such as showing love, pampering, and showing gratefulness. The feeling of togetherness was an essential part in childhood food narratives, and relationships were glued with the love transmitted through food: *"On weekends, my grandmother would always wake us up with music. And I always had that warm family feeling, you know? We would wake up and she would make us pancakes."* In these stories, food was the way of pampering the body and the soul, and was always attached to a significant emotional figure: *"Food was my grandmother's way of expressing love... On Sunday afternoons we had our hearts full of love and our stomachs full of food."* Food was also something to be grateful for, since it represented the efforts of the caregivers and the wellbeing of the family: "*Now that I am older, I understand what my parents went through and how hard they worked to have food for us... I am very grateful for that, because in my childhood we always had food, and I never lacked anything."*

4.1.2. Current stories around food and the meaning of care

Current dominant narratives still portray food as a reason for sharing and nuclear family union, showing less presence of extended family, and more presence of friends. Friends and partners become mainstream, and the role of food in strengthening relationships is now vital when building a chosen family: *"The thing is that now I include my close friends or people with whom I have a very close relationship. I really enjoy meals with friends or my partner, I especially love cooking for many people, preparing simple but delicious meals with love."* In these new dynamics, food preparation becomes collaborative, with more balance in the assignment of roles: *"Now we all participate, we all do something. One group brings the salad, another group brings the meats, another group brings rice."*

In these narratives, health gains protagonism as participants get more conscious of the impacts of food in their bodies. Participants understand a healthy diet as a balance in the presence of high-quality ingredients in the plate and know it should be accompanied by physical activity: *"I recognize my needs and prioritize good quality ingredients. I also exercise every day from Monday to Saturday."* Since sometimes it is hard to differentiate what is healthy from what has harmful ingredients, as a rule of thumb participants actively try avoiding ultra processed foods: *"I am very much into eating as healthy as possible, normally I don't include sausages in family meals, I avoid canned or packaged foods… I don't even buy snacks or sodas here at home."* High quality ingredients have visible health effects by helping avoid discomfort and

diseases: *"I am aware that a meal prepared with healthy ingredients will improve my health. My body and my immune system will be better prepared to fight any diseases."*

Sitting together at home to enjoy a meal with the family is a tradition that participants sometimes struggle to keep alive: *"I struggle a lot with my kid since he wants to eat while working on the computer… For me, sitting at the table with someone is so important that I prefer to wait for them to get home… I just don't like to eat by myself because for me sitting together has a very big meaning."* However, in many cases the appeal of food has migrated outside of the family table, due to different preferences and busy schedules: *"My mom works outside of home all day. I also work, but I'm closer to home, so that's why I come here to have lunch by myself while watching a show on my phone."* Food also allows participants to experience new flavors and explore different cultures: *"Now, I am exposed to food from all continents... So, it becomes quite an experience because I really enjoy going to the supermarket and knowing what this vegetable is called and how to prepare it to taste good… or going out to discover a new restaurant."*

Traditional voices from mom and grandma have lost prominence and are now in dialogue with participants' own voice and expertise: *"My mom sometimes asks me for recipes now... I think my relationship with her has changed a lot and that makes me very happy, knowing that my mom also takes my preferences into account and asks me for recipes."* This expertise has been achieved by actively seeking information around healthy foods and alternative preparations. Social media and the internet favor this exploration by helping participants find restaurants and recipes, as well as by providing content from a wide variety of sources. This journey has led some to become content creators themselves: *"That's why people follow me on social media... to see how I eat and what my lifestyle is like. My profile is based on a very healthy relationship with food. I get information from books, scientific articles, videos from specialists, and I also ask some teachers in class.*" While their own voice has become more important, they leverage the voices of those around them to include them in this new narrative regardless of their age, and dare to question voices that were previously sacred: *"Now, I tell my grandma: No, grandma, you can't drink your juice with a lot of sugar because it's bad for you."*

In current food narratives, caring through food means guaranteeing wellbeing by making informed choices. Eating is no longer an act that is given for granted, and it becomes hard to ignore all the information around the connection between food and health: *"In the relationship of care and well-being, the most important pillar is eating well… If I eat poorly my body will be working with a low-quality energy source."* The idea of eating high quantities of food and the goal of being full, are replaced by the idea of food quality and the goal of being nourished: *"My wife and I prefer to sacrifice quantity and order something that is not so abundant but has a higher quality, so that we can assimilate it better."* To assure this, participants assume a more active role in choosing fresh ingredients and limiting portions. By making informed choices, participants seek to transcend the effects of food in the present to also include future health. Participants

are aware that a good nutrition today can set the conditions for a better old age: *"God permits, I would like to enjoy my golden years with good health. I want to be a healthy old lady."*

Caring through food also means showing love and meeting different needs. While food remains one of the main vehicles to show love to friends and family, it is now also a way to show self-love: *"Food means love now. Love for others, love for other living beings, for myself. Taking care of myself means eating well, if I am well, the people around me can be well, and I can help people."* Caring involves acknowledging each person's needs and respecting their preferences: *"Due to her age, my mom eats less, so it must be nutritious and low in salt. My son needs a lot of protein because he is growing. I like salads…So we try to cook and serve different portions with this in mind."*

4.2. Questioning meanings and assumptions

4.2.1. Assumptions and arising tensions

If sharing the same food is understood as a way to reassure people's belonging to a group, refusing to eat this food can be perceived as a way of rejecting and/or being ungrateful to the group: *"When I started to feel the need to include more vegetables, my parents got offended and my mother told me: "Oh well, my son, you either eat what I make or cook your own food". So, when I offered my dad something that I cooked, he would look at me as if I just had insulted him."* Being selective or showing preferences is not welcomed in many families, regardless of the reasons behind this. The tensions generated by people who eat differently can lead to internal conflict destabilizing group dynamics: *"When I started being a vegetarian, my family made a huge fight out of it. They even kicked me out of the house because I didn't want to eat animals in a family of meat eaters."* Participants who eat differently as kids, were seen as complicated and bullied by other family members, leading to a feeling of exclusion and emotional pain: *"I stopped going to family meetings, because there were 15 people in the family telling me: "this girl is so strange... this girl doesn't eat animals, how ridiculous is that... how absurd... that's nonsense." Growing up in an environment like that was horrible and very painful, I felt like I would never fit anywhere."*

Another assumption present in the family stories of participants, is that traditions around food do not need further justification beyond the value of intergenerational transmission of knowledge itself. This was linked to the unquestionability of the family as a hierarchical structure whose figures of power should not be contradicted. Tensions emerge when the traditional knowledge around food that linked nutrition to eating high quantities of home-made foods prepared by an emotionally significant person, collides with science-based knowledge that is widely available: *"I started to question food beliefs because of the things I saw on the Internet. I even brought those questions home, and that was almost an insult to my parents.*

With my parents, good food meant large quantities of carbohydrates. Lunch was a small piece of meat, a lot of rice, potatoes, yuca, plantains, no vegetables, and no salad."

However, the above does not imply that accessing more information outside the traditional knowledge of the family leads to better food choices. Despite a wider consciousness about healthy and nutritious foods in current food stories, the struggle against less healthy market alternatives is now more prevalent: "*You start including certain foods because these have vitamins or nutrients that work for you. But there is also a counterpart, like a villain's voice saying: "here's this double-patty burger with a bunch of delicious stuff." I'm 100% aware at this point that it's super harmful, but I still crave it*." Busy schedules and the incursion of women in the labor market, have limited the possibility of cooking healthy options at home: *"Although I know how to cook healthy and delicious food, sometimes I don't have time due to work, and I end up eating poorly, either because I skip meals or because the food I eat is not balanced but rich in carbohydrates."*

Hence, achieving a balance between healthy and tasty options becomes one of the main tensions participants disclose. While very few have found alternatives that meet their health and taste standards, most struggle with the perception of these two characteristics being mutually exclusive and solve it by limiting the portions of unhealthy foods: *"you begin to negotiate with yourself: I eat healthy 6 days of the week, then 1 day I eat whatever I want to compensate."* However, the constant need to limit and control themselves is, in many cases, related to anxiety. Some participants recognize either eating while anxious or becoming very anxious when trying to avoid unhealthy food, or both: "*I still really like candy and chips, I feel the same anxiety I had when I was little around them. Even though I know they're harmful, sometimes my anxiety gets out of control and I end up eating a lot of gummies or rice."* Not having a balanced diet and eating out of anxiety ends up affecting participants' body image. Some participants mention having a negative relationship with food and even eating disorders: "*I sometimes punish myself because I gained so much weight, and I even think I shouldn't eat anymore. I've even done extreme 3-day cleansing diets, eating only tangerines and things like that*."

4.2.2. Narrative expansion exercise

When comparing the location of the slider in relation to the statements in the first and second exercise, most participants observed an overall movement to the statements on the right (see table 1). This represented an increase in the values for each category, suggesting that their food narratives are now incorporating more elements of uniqueness and self-expression, interconnectedness, and inclusion (see figure 4). Some participants attribute this movement in their narratives to a higher consciousness regarding environmental issues: *"In my current story there is obviously more awareness about animals and the environment. I am almost completely on the other side… Well not completely because I am a flexitarian, but it has moved a lot to the right."* There is also an evident contrast between the traditional approach to food, where family

relationships were the only concern, and a more informed approach in an era when information is widely available: "*Before, the tradition was to think about people, but there was no ecological consciousness related to food.*"

			Childhood average	Current average	Childhood vs Current difference	Expansion %
	IDENTITY		**3.15**	**5.27**	**2.12**	**73%**
I1	0=It is important to fit in by eating what others eat	7=It is important to show preferences by eating differently	4.31	6.1	1.79	42%
I2	0=Everyone should conform with the food available	7=Everyone should be allowed to look for alternatives	2.87	5.45	2.58	90%
I3	0=Sharing the same food is the best way of enjoying a meal together	7=Each one having their favorite food is is the best way of enjoying a meal together	2.26	4.25	1.99	88%
	CONNECTEDNESS		**3.22**	**5.04**	**1.81**	**67%**
C1	0=Having a plate of food on the table depends on one or a couple of people	7=Having a plate of food on the table depends on a wider context	2	4.45	2.45	123%
C2	0=We reach the goal of having food by working hard individually	0=We reach the goal of having food by cooperating and strengthening networks	3.83	5	1.17	31%
C3	0=We focus on taking care of the family	7=We take care of the family, and also of the people, beings, and places upon which our food depends	3.84	5.66	1.82	47%
	SCOPE		**3.03**	**5.17**	**2.14**	**71%**
S1	0=There is me and my family	7=There is me, my family, other humans, animals, and the planet	3.19	5.31	2.12	66%
S2	0=What we eat affects our family	7=What we eat affects us, other humans, other species, and the planet.	3	4.78	1.78	59%
S3	0=We care about the well-being of the family	7=We care about the well-being of family members, other humans, and other beings.	2.9	5.43	2.53	87%

Table 1. Narrative Expansion Exercise Results

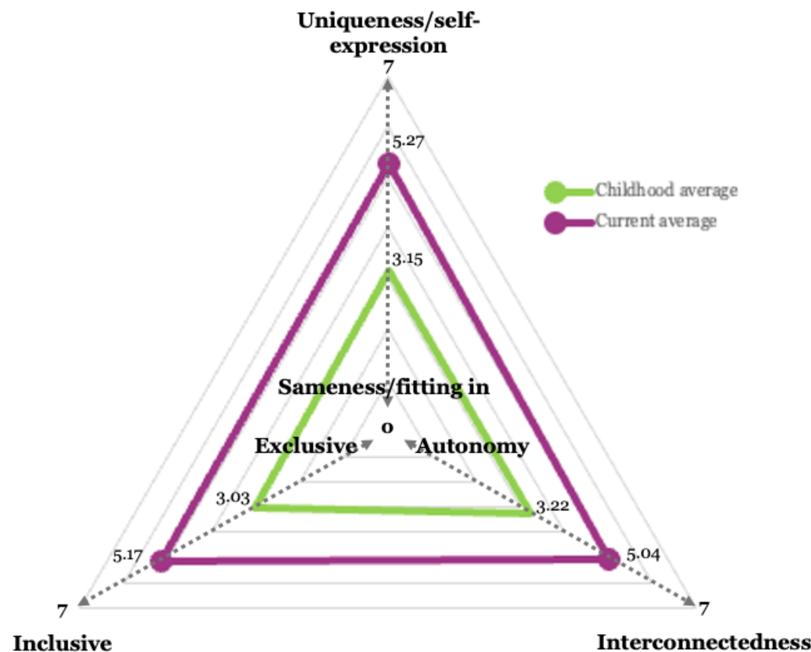

Figure 4. Narrative expansion: identity, connectedness, and scope axis.

In the Identity axis, participants' responses show an expansion of 73% towards uniqueness and self-expression, when comparing childhood stories around food vs current stories. Particularly, responses in I2 showed an increase of 90% towards being allowed to look for food alternatives instead of conforming with the given options. Also, there was an increase of 88% towards everyone having their favorite food instead of sharing the same food as the best way to enjoy a meal together, when comparing childhood versus current narratives. In most childhood stories, eating - and liking - the same foods was the way to belong and show respect to the family, leaving little room to showing preferences: *"It was kind of an authoritarian regime… in my time I didn't have the right to say: I don't want to bring that piece of meat to school, we had to like it and eat it."* In current stories, participants acknowledge and give space for individual preferences: *"Here at home I respect everyone's preferences. There are days when we prepare different foods for everyone. If my daughter, for example, doesn't like a type of chicken, I don't force her to eat it and I prepare something different for her."*

In the Connectedness axis, results show an expansion of 67% towards interconnectedness when comparing childhood vs current food stories. Responses in C1 show an increasing awareness of the dependence of the food we consume on a wider context in current stories, compared to childhood stories where this was inexistent: *"We never thought about it in the past, that food could also affect the planet... as kids we were never told that."* The exposure to different people acting on their concerns and to new sources of information expanded this knowledge: *"In my family, we didn't think about the environment, or animals,*

or anything like that. I started to think about it when I met a classmate at university who was a vegetarian because she loved animals. Then I thought: "but I also love animals.".. from there I started to question myself... Later on, I was a vegetarian for 7 years."

Finally, in the scope axis, results show an expansion of 71% towards inclusion when comparing childhood and current food stories. In the stories about food when growing up, participants report that family was the only reality and priority. Responses in S3 evidence a higher concern for the wellbeing of humans and other beings outside the family in current stories around food: "*What happens if my neighbor doesn't have her 3 meals because she doesn't have the resources? Then we must think a little more about others, my son having a snack isn't the only thing that matters*." In some cases, the well-being of the animals and systems that provide food for participants is evidently connected to participants' own well-being: *"If you want optimal milk, then feed and take good care of the cow. Do you want that animal for meat? Then take good care of it, keep it well, and give it a healthy diet."*

4.3. Finding Unique Outcomes and Creating Possibilities for Change

Participants' current dominant narrative shows more awareness of the implications of food on health, the interconnections related to food production, and the need for respecting self-expression. However, this awareness has not represented a change in habits for most. Only some participants show their care concerns through changes in their food consumption. Below, we explore the concerns, experiences and relationships that show participants' capacity to relate in a different way with food. These can serve as the unique outcomes that could open the possibility to new narratives.

4.3.1. Food-related concerns

Whether it is related to food production, consumption, or disposal, participants showed diverse concerns related to their current relationship with food. The most prominent concern around food was animal wellbeing and the environmental impacts of animal-based food. While many participants recognized their love for meat, many of them have also reduced their meat consumption at some point or have changed their animal-based protein sources to assure a better treatment of animals: *"I buy eggs from rural families who keep hens roaming freely. Since I started buying eggs from happy hens, I have seen a change in my feelings. I feel good, it gives me a feeling of well-being and that I am at least doing my bit to help this mess of a planet."* It is not unknown that the meat industry involves environmental impacts and suffering. Yet, the increasing information about the impacts of meat consumption has moved beyond the industry and opened a space for also questioning and de-romanticizing the traditional way of treating animals: *"All of these things were not known before because there was not much access to information, but we did what tradition taught us, what came from grandparents and parents regarding how to handle animals. I always thought it was wrong what they did to animals. I have always been too much of an animal lover."* Even if a vegetarian diet is not an option for them, some acknowledge that reducing animal-based foods can be

impactful as well: *"When I eat less meat, I am contributing to discouraging large-scale production and reducing environmental pollution."*

Being sensible to suffering is one of the main drivers to question current practices. Even though emotional connection to the suffering of human and non-human others can be seen as "exaggerated", deep down participants acknowledge the wrongness of it: *"some people tell me that I need to understand that it is "just" an animal… although my mother in law was raised in a farm, she does not have that connection… when my dog died she said that it was "just" a dog"* . It becomes a big concern around justice and defending those who are vulnerable: *"So I am a very empathetic person and I feel the suffering of others. I care about the children who suffer, I care about what animals feel, I care about old people. And all the struggles and the "punches" that I've received in life have always been for defending someone. I feel the pain of injustice."* Also, some participants were concerned about how the suffering of animals in the food industry is transmitted to those who eat them, avoiding non-organic animal-based foods.

Another concern present in participants' stories was the reduction of food-related waste. In many cases, this referred to recycling food packaging and avoiding single-use shopping bags: "When we go grocery shopping, we already have the habit of avoiding the plastic bags." In other cases, this meant following weekly menus and serving the right portions: "When I was little, I couldn't leave the table before finishing everything on my plate. Now it's more about ordering what I'm really going to eat or cooking and not wasting anything."

The health of friends and family appeared as a concern particularly for those surrounded by people who struggle to find balance in their eating habits: *"I've been trying to involve my cousin in improving his exercise and nutrition habits, now that he is moving out of his parents' house."* Participants also showed concerns linked to the life quality of humans that are not part of their close social context. Supporting local farmers was mentioned as a way of guaranteeing better livelihoods for them and a higher quality in their products: *"I buy from small farmers since I think they are more aware and know how to treat nature better…So, buying from them is a way, to take care of nature and help their families."* Also, other participants showed concern for those who do not have access to food, mentioning volunteering experiences where they get to share food with those in need: *"When I was at the university, there was a volunteer group, so we got to share food through the foundations we worked with."*

4.3.2. Events and relationships

Beyond internal concerns, external events and relationships were also reported as drivers of care-related dietary changes. Illnesses and deaths were reported as the most prominent events that fostered changes in food consumption. At the individual level, some participants reported gastrointestinal symptoms at a young age due to a poor and unhealthy diet in many cases related to eating disorders: *"I started with gastritis and headaches. It got to the point where I couldn't eat anything because it made me sick. I was*

very thin, but I still saw myself fat in the mirror." At the family level, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, and even death were spotted as consequences of dietary patterns, becoming a reason for self-care: *"It's really hard to see members of your family die because of diabetes… when my grandma died, she wasn't even 40. She suffered lower limb amputations. So, for me, caring and loving myself means avoiding getting there."*

Witnessing animal cruelty and environmental impacts through the media or through direct experiences also led some participants to show changes in their food consumption. These experiences ranged from revealing the secrets of the animal industry through documentaries to facing cruel traditions: "*Every December in [my hometown], there is this tradition of following a pig with knives. I used to end up crying every single time. There was this time when they stabbed the pig and it wouldn't die. I started crying and thinking: this cannot be ok, it cannot be ok that this animal is suffering like that*." For them, it was impossible to unsee and ignore this shocking reality after these events: "*what made me want to be a vegetarian was the shock of facing the truth about the food industry, fishing practices, how animals are treated in farms… Watching those videos made me think: how is it possible that I am only seeing meat on my plate while ignoring all this reality behind it*."

The bond with companion species also motivated new ways of caring through food. In some cases, it made participants more conscious about the importance of meeting their specific needs in the same way they do with the humans of the family. The relevance of food in the current and future health of companion species, adds up to participants' awareness of being their voice and protectors: *"Since we have dogs at home we cook for them. We change what we give them when they get sick, and their immune system needs a boost. We are always careful with what we give them, they deserve that someone cooks for them."* In other cases, the relationship with companion species has permeated participant's perception of other animals, leading them to adopt vegetarian diets as they found commonalities with the animals used for food by humans: "*I started making a connection between every single animal and my dog. That pig could be my dog. That chicken could also be mi dog. I could only think that it was not ok to make them suffer. And then I said: I just can't, I don't want to eat animals anymore*."

5. Discussion

In this section, we propose three alternative narratives that could expand the meaning of care for sustainable food consumption by moving on the axes of identity, connectedness, and scope (see figure 1). For each case, we 1) identify the elements of the **dominant narrative** that situate it in the left/inferior quadrant of the narrative space (see figure 1), 2) analyze the **unique outcomes** within participants' stories that contradict them, 3) explore the **tensions** that arise when acting on these concerns, and 4) proposes an **Alternative Narrative and Changes Required** for it to succeed. We also highlight the role of agency in the materialization of our concerns about care, shaping conversations, and changing narratives.

5.1. A narrative about identity: Connecting with emotions and acting on them

Dominant Narrative: Within a technocentric worldview, where humans have the right to exploit and dominate what is around them, the emotions – or lack of them - that serve the economic machine are promoted (Gladwin et al., 1995; Shields, 2005). While identity traits such as rationality – understood under neoclassical economics lenses as utility maximization -, self-control, and emotional stoicism are praised in this dominant narrative, showing a wide and ambiguous arrange of emotions is considered inferior, as these are harder to control and use efficiently (Shields, 2005). As in any regime, the voices that express divergent needs, seeking to transform the current order, are either controlled or silenced (Elster, 2008; Gilligan, 2014). Under this particular narrative, the adoption of manageable traits linked to a maximization of individual utility and profit, give place to the celebration of rationality and precision as the forces that keep the economic machine running (Gladwin et al., 1995; Nelson, 2005). In this sense, this dominant narrative can restrict the expression of emotions that hinder market dynamics and threaten the established production-consumption systems.

Unique Outcomes: Emotions that emerge from participants' caring essence may differ from the self-centeredness and rationality in the dominant narrative, demanding them to stand by their concerns. Acting on the emotions related to the wellbeing of others becomes the basis of an alternative version of the story where we use self-expression for the common good. Participants in this study mentioned "being sensitive", "empathizing", and "feeling what others feel" as one of the most valued parts of their identity, leading some of them to apply this to their food choices. These participants acknowledged that current food system practices, particularly those related to animal-based foods, just don't feel right. Others admitted that ignoring what is hidden behind certain food practices to instead roll with the regime is tempting, since it prevents them from negative emotional impacts (Joy, 2020). However, those who dare to connect with these emotions and act on them feel empowered to make a difference. Hence, listening and acting on these feelings can make the change inevitable and unstoppable (D. Meadows, 1997).

Tensions: However, standing for and acting on caring concerns brings tensions, particularly when this involves opposing family food traditions (Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022). Participants reported conflict with loved ones when trying to eat differently based on their care concerns, which corroborates what has been found in the literature around veganism and vegetarianism in a meat-centric society (Buttny & Kinefuchi, 2020; Oliver, 2023). Yet, participants' stories show how these acts can generate new conversations that end up changing family food perceptions, as those who dared to eat differently were proved right at the end. While acknowledging the suffering of other species was uncommon decades ago, the increasing adoption of meat free diets and availability of plant-based alternatives, shows the spread of

new narratives and suggests the emergence of ways to balance these tensions (Asano & Biermann, 2019; Mylan et al., 2019).

Alternative Narrative and Changes Required: Connecting and being true to our emotions can aid in the transition to sustainable diets, especially in a context that accepts diverse identities. Giving a safe space to uniqueness and self-expression allows us to speak up when we know there is something wrong, even if this does not fit with the beliefs of some members of the group (D. Meadows, 1997). Strong expectations around conformity and little tolerance to critical thinking can hinder people's capacity to speak up when their concerns discern from common beliefs. Differentiating from the group usually comes at a cost, since questioning the principles of the group can represent a threat to peer-esteem and belonging (R. Akerlof, 2016). Less flexible contexts, where questioning the status quo is not allowed, can limit the possibilities for adopting alternative perspectives as this may lead to exclusion.

We propose that self-expression and uniqueness should not be mutually exclusive with belonging to a community, making it relevant to foster spaces where diverse identities are respected. Supporting this idea, the concept of Critical Communities refers to groups of people who actively support each other, are willing to question dominant norms, further critical thinking skills, and acknowledge interdependence, without being fixed in the idea of sameness (Bettez, 2011). We believe that critical community building can foster emerging narratives where we can connect with emotions and act on them, without being excluded or silenced. Being free to express people's identity and emotions should not necessarily have to collide with belonging and seeking collectivistic goals (Murthy, 2020). Although a society that focuses on individualistic traits such as self-control and the maximization of individual profit, has been linked to self-expression (Santos et al., 2017), seeking for the common wellbeing could make space for self-expression as well. Indeed, keeping both diversity and collectivistic goals is a fundamental element in expanding narratives of care for sustainability.

5.2. A narrative about scope: Recognizing commonalities and expanding the pack

Dominant Narrative: The dominant narrative shows a reduced community of fate that focuses on the maximization of individual and family profits and benefits. Those who are not part of this community are not only excluded but overlooked, despite their roles in making these profits and benefits possible. To illustrate this, the damage and pollution caused to the environment in the consumption-production process are considered externalities, and are ignored in the dominant narrative (Ayres & Kneese, 1969). The scope of what we consider our community has been shrinking, households have reduced in size and single-member households have increased (Santos et al., 2017). Within market dynamics, societies move away from strong kin-based relationships to establish shallow but beneficial relationships with strangers

(Henrich, 2020). Given that these relationships focus on protecting individual benefits, doomsday or climate denying narratives may enhance the tendencies of accumulating for the self, and the uncertainty about who will participate in our (kids) future (Folke et al., 2021), hindering the possibility of expanding our community of fate.

Unique Outcomes: In contrast with the above, most participants in this study are aware of the relevance of expanding their communities of fate to other humans and more-than-humans. Their stories show the process from a growing up in a family that only considered the needs of its members, to caring for others who are not necessarily related by blood. This process has been influenced by the constant access to a wider world of information, where the struggles and suffering from others becomes evident. Expanding the community to other humans is manifested, in some cases, by sharing the food with those in need, whether it is neighbours or vulnerable people who they may not know: *"I can no longer think only about myself. I must also be a channel of blessings for others."* Also, some participants buy directly from farmers or look for products that support better practices.

In the case of expanding the community to non-humans, companion species have changed their perception about the otherness. They show up in their stories as family members, who deserve to be cared for, since they are recognized as vulnerable and sentient. Emotional and physical traits of companion species are perceived as similar, if not identical, to those of humans leading some to question the way in which other animals are treated. Identified commonalities strengthen the bond with other beings, inviting participants to become their voice, nourish them, and even care for their mental health: *"If he is part of me [dog], then why can't I care for him like I care for myself? Why wouldn't I feed him good food? Also, he's a living being that needs to interact with others, otherwise he will go nuts."*

Tensions: Yet, acknowledging the needs and commonalities of other humans and more-than-humans requires additional efforts in a context set for excluding them. Participants' narratives corroborate the literature on sustainable behaviour, since including the wellbeing of others beyond the household involves additional efforts, the right timing, and implies facing societal judgement (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Particularly, sustainable food consumption requires learning about alternative preparations, additional planning, higher costs, and leaving or modifying family food traditions (Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022; Dixon & Isaacs, 2013; Vermeir et al., 2020). The emergent tensions between the desire and the costs of including others, are solved by most participants through either numbing themselves or acting in small scale. In a market context where food is a commodity and the wellbeing of the system is overlooked, the scope of consumers' choices is limited (Vivero-Pol, 2017).

Alternative Narrative and Changes Required: Humans are equal, part of nature, and have commonalities with other non-human species. Feeling equal and finding commonalities can be challenging when our identity is built upon the traits that differentiate "us" from "them", giving us the sense of belonging

to a specific group. We tend to have higher opinions about the members of our group, to feel proud of it, and to feel that it is superior to others (G. A. Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; R. Akerlof, 2016). This "Us vs. Them" dynamic is also evident in our relationship with nature and non-human species. Human Exceptionalism - which refers to the conceptual framework that considers humans more evolved and valuable than other species - has separated us from the natural context and convinced us of our superiority (J. J. H. Kim et al., 2023).

Yet, humans are also capable of finding common ground and establishing meaningful relationships with those who think, believe, or look completely different (Zaki, 2024). We can find our shared humanity, include others in our group, and work for each other's wellbeing even under the most extreme circumstances (Solnit, 2010). Expanding this to other species is possible in contexts where the binary division between the human and the non-human starts to fade (de la Cadena, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2011). By perceiving the human as embedded in the more-than-human, we can see that our rights as a species come with the responsibility of caring for the more-than-human world (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024). This entails taking seriously the interests and wellbeing of those who do not have a voice, and considering making them part of our pack (Kopnina, 2012; Rodríguez-Garavito, 2024).

5.3. A narrative about connectedness: Ending the transmission of suffering

Dominant narrative: The dominant narrative portrays human wellbeing as disconnected and independent from the wellbeing of the more-than-human world. This disconnection comes from a technocentric worldview, from which every system can be understood by dividing it and by studying each of its parts in isolation (Gladwin et al., 1995). The recognition of our interdependence with the biosphere has been also blurred by a human exceptionalism paradigm that sets a clear boundary between human societies and the natural world, seeing the last one as infinitely abundant and at the service of our needs (Catton & Dunlap, 1978). Under these paradigms, the harm caused to other beings and the environment stays with them, since they are perceived as separated from us. Humans still receive the benefits of this extractive interaction, and the final result seems to be detached from the process behind it.

Unique outcomes: Growing up, participants' narratives focused on the family as an isolated system that only felt connected with those whom it shared blood ties with. However, current narratives show a higher awareness on the dependence and impacts of food choices on a wider context. Interconnectedness becomes clearer when they see changes in their environment or through the media, and are subject to local restrictions due to resource scarcity: *"here in Bogota we are suffering because there is not enough water… we are under water restrictions that even affects how we cook."* Also, the dependency with other species becomes evident in some participants' narratives, who reflect on how other beings become part of them,

highlighting that the harm to others eventually comes back, and questioning the real benefits of extractive interactions: *"when animals are in stress situations, their bodies generate a bunch of hormones and chemicals that are finally transmitted to us through their meat," "I think that all that suffering becomes part of karma. Eating those animals who suffered is bad karma."* In these cases, eating differently and avoiding harmful practices becomes an embodied experience: *"I truly feel it, if these are "happy hen" eggs from small farms, they taste different, and I do feel better."* Finally, some participants mentioned not only caring, but being cared for by other species, showing the reciprocity in the relationships with the more-than-human world: *"cows are also taking care of you, so you must care for them, you must give them what you receive. If you want optimal milk, give them good food and take good care of them."*

Tensions: Acknowledging the connection with a wider context can be both confusing and overwhelming. For instance, the impact of dietary choices such as meat consumption in climate change may not be immediately evident for most (Macdiarmid et al., 2016). The human brain struggles when asked to process connections that are distant in space and time, making the long-term implications of decisions hard to foresee (Kahneman, 2011). Also, when people dimension how their everyday decisions may be affecting others in a system that rewards profit over wellbeing, this can lead to tension and paralysis (Longo et al., 2019).

Alternative Narrative and Changes Required: Since we are all connected, the wellbeing of the beings and systems involved in what we eat becomes our own wellbeing. From a relational ontology perspective, isolating individuals from each other and their context is impossible, since we can only co-become in the interactions with the system (Bawaka Country et al., 2013; Haraway, 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). In contrast with an exctractivist perspective where we could use the vulnerability of others to become more powerful, in this alternative story the vulnerability of others becomes our own. Being connected and co-becoming with each other involves that caring for the vulnerable is caring for ourselves.

5.4. Making the change happen

In all the alternative narratives proposed above, we find that agency becomes the fuel to move in the narrative space, allowing us to act according to care components like recognition, vulnerability, empathy, and respect for others. In this study, agency is understood as an emergent property that allows actors within networks to shape their lives and help others, increasing their wellbeing and their capacity to change their environment (Garud et al., 2010; Pelenc et al., 2015; Petesch et al., 2005). Agency encompasses the entire process from being conscious about the need for inclusion, self-expression, or interconnection, to expressing these concerns, acting on them, reaching out to others to make collective choices, and evaluating these choices (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019).

In a circular way, agency aids in changing narratives and narratives can foster agency. Agency leads to materialization of individual care concerns into action. Acts are visible to others and foster conversations around the issue of concern. Conversations can spread concerns throughout different groups. When conversations are sparked in diverse groups and add up, these can escalate into narratives of care (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025). Narratives can strengthen our capacity to act and interact differently (A. Morgan, 2000; White, 2007). Narratives of care reach out to new actors, who identify with shared concerns and feel empowered to act on them, spreading the narrative widely.

This is evident in the narratives of some participants in this study, who showed a higher sensitivity to the wellbeing of others, where open to recognize commonalities with other humans and more-than-humans, and showed their intention to reduce the suffering behind food. When faced with these concerns they dared to act and make changes in their diets. In this process, they went beyond pluralistic ignorance (D. T. Miller & McFarland, 1991), and disregarded the assumptions and voices telling them that no one will approve their dietary changes. They actively searched for information to support their food choices and became “experts” in this topic. They persisted, and after sparking several conversations and even conflict among friends and family, people started reaching out to them for advice. The narrative started to change around them, leading to an expanded meaning of care through food.

6. Conclusion

An expanded meaning of care can aid in the adoption of sustainable diets and in pivoting towards sustainable food consumption. In this study, we applied a narrative change framework (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025) to find three alternative narratives that can foster this expansion. Each of these narratives entail moving within a specific axe of the narrative space, by responding to care components such as recognition, vulnerability, empathy and respect. A narrative about connecting with emotions can help us move in the axis of identity towards self-expression, and this movement is fostered by a context of empathy and respect. A narrative about finding commonalities and expanding the pack can help us move in the axis of scope towards inclusion, and this movement is fostered through conversations and acts that show recognition of others as full partners in interactions. A narrative about ending the transmission of suffering can help us move in the axis of connectedness towards interconnection, and this movement is fostered by a context that recognizes vulnerabilities as an opportunity to co-become.

Despite its contributions to the study of the role of narratives in sustainability, this study comes with some limitations. Since it is based on the analysis of narratives, the results presented here emerged from a specific cultural context and are not representative of a wider population. Instead, they show an application of the framework proposed by Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025), and provide valuable insights regarding how to expand the meaning of care in relation to sustainable food consumption within specific

communities. Also, the resulting stories are based on unique outcomes – or events that contradict the dominant story- which implies that the three of these may not be present in the narratives of most participants. However, this does not mean that these narratives are not appealing to a wider audience.

This study addresses the urgent need for changes in current food systems, by offering narratives based on care that can shape more sustainable interactions. The narratives around scope, identity, and interconnectedness can guide actions at the production and consumption levels. When these actions become visible, and spark new conversations, alternative narratives based on care can start to spread and add up, supporting more actions. Also, the three stories we propose in this paper can be used by academic and government institutions as a way to foster sustainable food consumption. These provide a starting point to question the status quo of food systems that serve the economy but not the people or the more-than-human world that supports us.

Future research can explore the role and presence of these narratives in other cultural contexts. It can also expand the use of the framework to other communities, to compare the narratives of care that emerge around food in each of them. Additionally, since care has been traditionally assigned to those who identify with feminine traits, it would be interesting to see how to foster narratives of care that are meaningful to everyone regardless of their gender identity.

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Chapter 3: Food stories and the Narrative Journey to Caring Communities: The Case of Nashira

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1. Introduction

While care is fundamental to human relationships, its presence in the dominant economic narrative remains marginal, tilting the balance to self-mastery and disconnection (Tronto, 2017). Narratives of care and interdependence can re-balance a socioeconomic system that positions transactions as the solution to all human challenges (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025). Global food systems prioritize profits over nourishment, treating food as a commodity and driving exploitative practices that erode environmental and social wellbeing. Alternative food networks question these dynamics by following practices that seek to care for and nourish both the human and the more-than-human (Beacham, 2018). This study explores how narratives of care centered on food can serve as catalysts for reimagining sustainability in intentional communities. Food brings to life the connection and empowerment needed to help the environment thrive and ensure wellbeing for all, as communities work together to become more caring.

The concept of care has been widely discussed as both an essential human activity, and a relational practice that sustains wellbeing (Gilligan, 2014; Spangenberg & Lorek, 2022; Tronto, 1998). In the field of sustainability, care has emerged as the basis of more equitable economic systems (Lorek et al., 2023), and the center of communities that prioritize reciprocity over transactions (Beacham, 2018; Kimmerer, 2024). The role of narratives in fostering socioeconomic changes has gained attention recently (Shiller, 2020), with some authors exploring the role of narratives in shaping social basins of attraction (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). Narratives shape identities and relationships, and provide meaning to the human experience (Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1991). However, while studies have examined narratives as mechanisms for structuring social action (Harper et al., 2004), and influencing policy, their role in care-based sustainability transitions is still nascent.

The intersection between narratives of care and sustainable food practices remains an emerging field. Much of the literature has built on the emergence of alternative economic frameworks (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Lorek et al., 2023; Raworth, 2018), or on alternative food systems (Beacham, 2018; Goodman et al., 2012; Vivero-Pol, 2018). Although narratives play a crucial role in structuring and transmitting caring practices within communities, their significance is often overlooked. Specifically, the impact of care in

challenging patriarchal power structures that hinder reciprocal relationships with the human and more-than-human world requires more attention. Narratives that support patriarchal hierarchies, where transactive and exploitative relations are accepted, prevent us from expressing our own emotions and the vulnerability implied in caring relationships (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). In this study, we analyze how narratives of care evolve within a community and how these narratives contribute to sustainability transitions that are characterized by relationships of interdependence and reciprocity.

This study examines the role of care narratives in shaping community-based food initiatives. Using the case of Nashira—a female-led ecovillage structured around the principles of care, solidarity, and environmental stewardship—our study explores how childhood and communal food stories change through everyday conversations and acts of care. We analyze how care moves beyond the private sphere into collective action, building long-lasting relationships and shaping the physical space to guarantee wellbeing for everyone. To do so, we used a case study design (Yin, 2017; Zainal, 2007) supported by ethnographic observation (Nippert-Eng, 2015; O'Reilly, 2004). We conducted 10 life story interviews and hosted a communal narrative session with community members. We find that the narrative journey of community members is characterized by moving towards inclusion, sharing, vulnerability as an invitation to reciprocity, and peer-to-peer empowerment. We also find that narratives spread within and beyond communities when people act on their concerns and change their material environment to solve common needs. Finally, our findings show that tensions are an inevitable part of community life that adds value to social systems and can be seized as a source of creativity.

This study offers insights for policy members, scholars in sustainability, and grassroots organizations working to design inclusive and care-centered sustainability frameworks. By showing how narratives of care influence decision making and collective action, this research challenges the dominant economic narrative and provides alternative pathways for creating communities that prioritize the wellbeing of humans and more-than-humans above monetary concerns. Nashira serves as a living example of how communities can reclaim their agency and inspire broader changes towards care-based sustainability, while acknowledging the needs, tensions, and vulnerabilities that makes us human.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we provide a theoretical framework for the study encompassing the concepts of communities of care, sustainable community-based food initiatives, community agency, narratives and narrative change. In section 3, we describe our methodology and the framework used for the analysis. In section 4, we present the results from the interviews and the communal narrative session with community members. Finally, in sections 5 and 6, we explore Nashira's narrative journey to achieve a caring community, the process of narrative transmission within and beyond the community, the emerging tensions, and propose future research pathways.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Communities of Care

Care is a fundamental component of human relationships. All humans are vulnerable and have been recipients or givers of care at some point (Tronto, 2017). Care involves recognizing mutual dependency, mutual responsibility, and the desire to fulfill the needs and increase the well-being of others (Collins, 2015). It also involves physical and mental work and may not always be a pleasurable activity. Tronto (1998) describes four stages of care that involve *caring about* or becoming aware of someone's caring needs, *caring for* or committing to act to fulfill those caring needs, *caregiving* or learning how to care in an appropriate way, and *care receiving* or providing feedback on the fulfillment of those needs. However, as it fulfills the requirements for others' well-being and survival, it leaves a sense of satisfaction for doing the right thing despite its costs (Spangenberg & Lorek, 2022). Care work is fundamental to maintain the functioning of any family, community, or society. In this study, we follow Tronto and Fisher's (1990) definition of care as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and 'repair' our world, so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web" (p.40).

Caring for a community involves the question of who to include in that community (Spangenberg & Lorek, 2022). The *we* from the Anthropocene has implied a hierarchy where some humans, particularly those who have what is considered valid knowledge, are above other humans and non-humans, seeing the first as subjects and the second as objects (de la Cadena, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2011). Under this premise, the needs and wellbeing of an exclusive *we* have been prioritized, overlooking the needs of the environment and other humans. This has led to a disconnection with our "life-sustaining web."

Yet, a sustainable future implies a reconnection with the biosphere, and an expansion of our *we* or *community of fate* (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Folke et al., 2011). A *community of fate* is the group of humans and more-than-humans that depend on each other for survival, sharing a present and a future (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Levi, 2020). Expanding our *communities of fate* involves fostering cooperative cultures, reciprocal altruism, and making sacrifices for those beyond a small social group. It also involves incurring in acts of solidarity for human and non-human members of the community who may not reciprocate them (Levi, 2020). This shows that expanding our communities of fate is accompanied by growing our capacity for caring. A community of fate aiming at a sustainable future is a caring community. We define *caring communities* as the collective of humans and more-than-humans that foster each other's well-being and survival in a complex life-sustaining web.

Caring communities can become the basis for larger economic changes. For instance, *community economies* are created by people to live well with other humans and the world around them, using the

surplus to enrich social and environmental health (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). In the same line, an *economy of care* prioritizes the wellbeing of all beings, aims at an equitable and just distribution of resources, and seeks to minimize environmental impacts (Lorek et al., 2023). These economies' proposal is to make all the things that generate wellbeing visible, including the day-to-day processes and ethical choices that community members make, questioning the idea of an economy only driven by those in power. In line with the relational nature of care, communities and economies of care acknowledge interdependencies and are based on relationships instead of transactions and extraction.

2.2. Sustainable community-based food initiatives

The global market is based on transactional relationships, treating food as a private good and a commodity (Vivero-Pol, 2018). If we look for a system's objectives based on their outcomes (D. H. Meadows, 2008), then the goal of the dominant food systems is not to guarantee proper nutrition for humanity but to increase profits (Lang, 2014; Stuckler & Nestle, 2012). For instance, food categories such as soft drinks and highly processed foods keep growing, particularly in low and middle-income countries, and households worldwide are exposed to constant advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages (Kelly et al., 2019; Stuckler et al., 2012). In profit driven settings, "nameless and placeless" foods are mainstream, as these offer attractive prices and foster economic growth, regardless of its health and environmental impacts (Goodman et al., 2012). In this context, sustainable community-based food initiatives are swimming against the tide (Goodman et al., 2012)

Sustainable community-based food initiatives go beyond transactions to focus on relationships, treating food as commons and building community. Food is treated as commons when we bring back its symbolic ties, the land where it is produced, and the embedded reciprocity among the humans and more-than-humans who produce it (Goodman et al., 2012; Vivero-Pol, 2018). Food materializes the mutual responsibilities in a moral economy, when communities prioritize a fair distribution of food and everyone's survival over profits (Thompson, 1971). Communities strengthen by managing their own food related practices, and by collectively deciding how to assure survival for everyone and what to do with surplus (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). When the "name and place" of food is acknowledged and honoured, communities become the center, and interactions become charged with intentions of fulfilling everyone's needs. Also, this intention of mutual responsibility and sharing practices within the community, can expand beyond human ties through the desire to produce healthy food by using methods that benefit the soil and the beings around it (Sovová et al., 2021).

Sustainable community-based food initiatives are caring communities in action, as these require a group of humans and more-than-humans to work together for each other's survival and wellbeing. Alternative food networks are an example of this, as these practice care while acknowledging the web of

interdependency needed to nourish everyone in the group, acting under an ethos of "food for us, food for nature"(Beacham, 2018, p. 540). These initiatives consider environmental, human, and non-human health, as well as local food cultures and connection to the land. In many cases, sustainable community-based food initiatives rely on organic production of local foods to protect the Earth and on cooperative working to strengthen relationships (Seyfang & Elliott, 2008).

2.3. Community agency

Making community-based initiatives a reality requires agency. Agency refers to the freedom to pursue and accomplish our goals and values (Sen, 2000). It is also the capacity of acting on our circumstances and shaping the course that our lives take (Bandura, 2006b). It involves both *autonomy*, as the capacity of understanding and assessing our own goals, and *ability*, as the objective powers that someone can use to meet these goals (Alkire, 2008). While agents are situated beings, born within a specific structure and inheriting specific cultures, they can cease to be passive recipients of their situation and act to bring about certain outcomes (Archer, 2000).

To bring about change, agency is exerted in different ways in specific social fields. Social fields are spaces where different players or actors - such as individuals, groups or institutions - interact. Each social field has its own rules, hierarchies, and relational protocols, fostering competition or collaboration (Bourdieu, 1984). Actors in each social field can organize in groups and have different social positions from where they can use their agency to actively maintain or change the system (Archer, 2000). An enabling structure provides the contextual conditions that shape people's ability – or inability - to participate and influence the "rules of the game" (Petesch et al., 2005). Despite the apparent rigidity of the structure, neither the rules of the game nor the actors who determine them are static, and can be subjected to change when personal or external factors harness windows of opportunity to spread a new vision (Pinzón-Camargo et al., 2022).

Agency happens at different levels, it is not only about achieving self-interested goals but also about aspiring and pursuing objectives that benefit a collective of beings (Bandura, 2006b; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). For instance, institutional entrepreneurs seek to transform dominant institutional arrangements and change rules that affect a group (Garud et al., 2007). They do so by leveraging different strategies such as, creating a vision of the future, supporting new markets and technologies, supporting advocacy groups and collective action, or mobilizing political support (Jolly & Raven, 2015). Change agents respond to context where dominant institutions may be failing and build bottom-up solutions by harnessing community resources (Ramos-Mejía & Balanzo, 2018).

For change agents to mobilize large-scale changes, several key components are involved. First, it starts with consciousness around personal and external factors that raise the need to act and transform oneself in

conjunction with others. Second, it requires conciliating actors' positions with the social field conditions, finding potential allies to participate in collective projects, and opening a niche to turn consciousness into action. Third, it embraces cooperative agency and institutional change that requires high levels of engagement in conversations about collective choices. And finally, it involves strategies to sustain the change by opening new opportunities and improving actors' capacity for action (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019; Pinzón-Camargo et al., 2022).

2.4. Narratives, communities, and narrative change

Narratives are stories that give meaning to the world around us and help us navigate relationships (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives shape behaviors and relationships making these comply with social expectations (Bruner, 2010). Understanding social expectations helps us adapt to a certain group and facilitates cohesion. Yet, the role of narratives transcends social adaptation in the present, as these can help us learn from our past and project the future (Crites, 1986). When facing uncertainty, human societies can develop a shared story to help them prepare for possible futures and guide their decisions in the present towards them (Beckert, 2016; S. G. B. Johnson et al., 2023).

In addition to their importance to society narratives have a relevant role at other levels. Self-narratives hold elements that are fundamental in the construction of our identity, giving sense to our past, and a glimpse of what is expected from us in the future (Polkinghorne, 1991; Schiffrin, 1996). Also, narratives serve as motivators that sustain everyday activities and can drive social change at the community level. Communities share narratives that portray their identity, their purpose, and their history. This common story emerges from a multidimensional web of self-narratives that are connected to each other in different ways, and can be reconstructed when internal or external changes require so (Harper et al., 2004).

Narratives change at different system levels as well. Although dominant narratives serve the status quo by spreading norms and expectations that prevent social changes, narratives are neither static nor permanent in society, constantly being created and recreated at the individual and community levels. For instance, at the family level a change in narratives can change relationships, addressing problems faced by the family system (White, 2001). At the community level, narratives have the capacity to structure daily decisions and actions (Harper et al., 2004) that become contagious and can add up to generate larger outcomes in society and the economy (Shiller, 2020). When a narrative no longer explains our experiences and is not compatible with our reality and relationships, or when it fails to portray what we expect from the future, the ground is set for alternative narratives to emerge (van der Leeuw, 2020; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). A change in narratives could aid in elaborating solutions to pressing environmental challenges and in visualizing sustainable futures (van der Leeuw, 2020).

Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025) propose a framework for narrative change that aids in shaping more sustainable scenarios at the community level. This framework is founded on the Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 2014; Tronto, 1998; Tronto & Fisher, 1990), Narrative Psychology (Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986a) and uses Narrative Therapy tools (A. Morgan, 2000; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990) to generate narrative changes towards sustainability. The framework encompasses three phases. In the first phase, the dominant narrative and the assumptions that maintain the dominant regime are identified (Foucault, 1980). The second phase creates possibilities for change by questioning the underlying assumptions of the dominant narrative through counter examples or *Unique Outcomes* that serve as evidence for doing things differently (White & Epston, 1990). After identifying alternative narratives based on these *Unique Outcomes*, the third phase encompasses strengthening and spreading these narratives, so the community starts acting on their concerns. A more comprehensive description of the framework is included in appendix 1.

Agency has an important role in the spread of narratives in community contexts as it allows people to act on their care concerns and visibly change their context. Materialized care concerns are seen by others and become the source of conversations that can question previous assumptions. These conversations can invite others to participate actively in caring choices through cooperative agency (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Acts and conversations can add up into narratives of care. Figure 1 summarizes the process of narrative transmission, which consists on acting on individual caring concerns, starting conversations that lead to collective action, spreading this conversations to wider groups where they add up into narratives, and including these emerging narratives into cultural products and public policy (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025).

Transmission of narratives of care

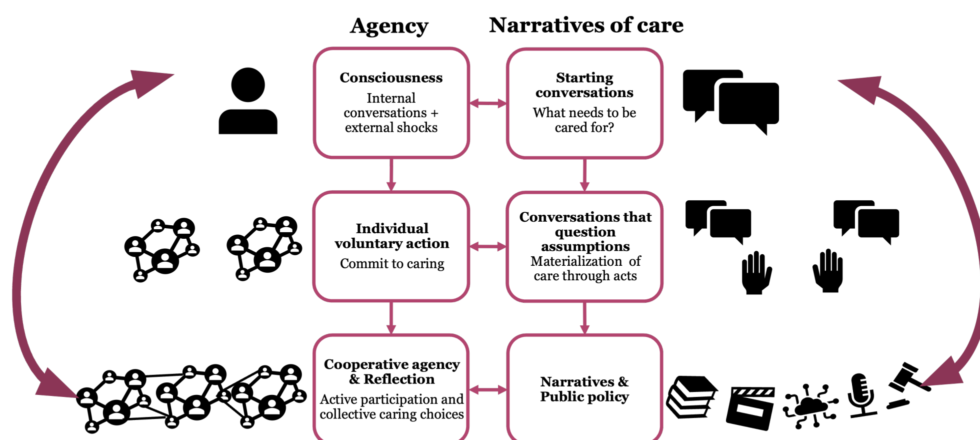

Figure 1. Transmission of narratives of care

Considering the four stages of care proposed by Tronto (1998), care labour (*caring for* and *care giving*) becomes essential in the transmission of narratives of care, since the materialization of care through acts is what changes contexts and relationships. Hence, without care work and without the visibilization of caring practices, narratives cannot add up and spread through networks.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

In this study, we used a case study design (Yin, 2017; Zainal, 2007) supported by ethnographic observation (Nippert-Eng, 2015; O'Reilly, 2004) to understand the role of care in food consumption narratives that flow within a community-based project. The case study seeks to comprehend a contemporary social phenomenon in depth and detail within a specific context (Feagin et al., 1991; Yin, 2017). It is a good fit when researching phenomena that includes a wide variety of relationships, and when this relationships can be observed directly (Fidel, 1984). In this community-based food initiative, the case study allowed us to gather data from different sources, and to get a holistic approach to this complex social network while understanding the context in which narratives flow (Feagin et al., 1991). Ethnographic observation supported our design, since it allowed us to capture behaviours and context elements that are relevant to the relationships within this community (Nippert-Eng, 2015).

An approach that mixed the exploration of narratives and the observation of the context, allowed us to identify opportunities for a narrative shift that fostered changes from lower to larger scales within this community. Through this type of research, it was possible to understand how narratives that flow through relationships and within the community, are negotiated to help coordinate collective action (M. Miller & Bridger, 2019).

3.2. Participants

A rural community-based food project was selected for this study. We used a set of operational criteria that allowed us to identify the case that could be a good fit for testing the theory presented in Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025) regarding the role of narratives of care in sustainability. These criteria encompassed: 1) having a community-oriented purpose, 2) being established around sustainability principles, 3) involving sustainable food production/consumption practices.

Under these criteria, Nashira, a rural community-based project, was selected from the Global Ecovillage Network. An ecovillage is an intentional community organized around sustainability values that seeks to promote social and environmental wellbeing for its human and non-human members (Global Ecovillage Network, n.d.). Community leaders were contacted through the information available in this webpage and

agreed to participate. Ten women from the community participated in interviews and a communal narrative session.

Nashira is a women-led—but not exclusive for women—community, built on the values of care, solidarity, and environmental stewardship. It started more than 20 years ago, with ASOMUCAF (the Association of Female-Headed Households, for its acronym in Spanish), an organization that gathered women displaced by violence to work on recycling activities. Most of these women grew up in big families from rural areas where agriculture was the main economic activity and where accessing education was not easy. When facing threats from armed groups, these families had to seek shelter in the city, where they had to start from scratch with little training for other activities. ASOMUCAF offered training in recycling as an economic activity that also provided flexibility for mothers.

Later, these women had the opportunity to apply their knowledge in agriculture and ensure a livelihood when a farmable land was given to ASOMUCAF by a private donor. There, they transformed the land by

planting and sharing food.

The possibility of building their own houses came later with the support of the Colombian government, the Mayor's and Governor's Offices. Nashira's women received training in construction and spent more than a thousand hours building their homes under the advice of a team of architects and engineers. The houses were made with recycled construction waste and ecological bricks at no monetary cost. Since then, the community has received training from various public institutions and private initiatives, and has developed projects related to organic food production and preparation, recycling, and tourism.

a) b) c)

Figure 2. a) Nashira's agora, b) community leaders, and c) home food gardens.

Nashira is located near Palmira, a region of Colombia characterized by its biodiversity, surrounded by sugar cane crops. With temperatures between 20 °C and 30 °C, Nashira's community has been able to raise animals for food, such as chicken, and has grown a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, such as avocados,

papaya, bananas, mangoes, guavas, tomatoes, and many others. Despite the fertility of the soil, the community is not self-sufficient, relying on some food products from the area. Also, some of Nashira's inhabitants earn their livelihoods in jobs outside the community.

Currently, after receiving proper training, 10 women from the community are leading the installation of solar panels and reused batteries both inside (e.g., at the waste collection centre in Nashira) and outside (e.g., at local community meals) the ecovillage, aiming to become one of the main renewable energy promoters in the area.

3.3. Data collection

Case studies and ethnographic took place in person, during March 2024. Information was collected through interviews, communal narrative sessions, and participant-observations (Yin, 2017). An invitation with information about the study was presented to the leaders of the community, who reached out to community members willing to participate in the interviews and communal narrative sessions.

We used a protocol with open-ended questions for the interviews and the communal narrative session, and an observational protocol to register the place, date, descriptions and reflections related to each site (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2017). The protocol's questions were based on a narrative-change framework described in section 2 and in appendix 1, to understand how narratives of care converged and spread along this community's journey, as shown in Figure 2. The interviews explored the phases 1 (identifying previous narratives and assumptions) and 2 (creating possibilities for narrative change) of this framework to get a personal version of childhood and community stories. The communal narrative session focused on phases 2 (creating possibilities for narrative change) and 3 (reinforcing new scenarios) to gather a co-constructed narrative around food and care in the community. The topics related to phase 1 encompassed participants' narratives around food while growing up, the assumptions supporting these narratives, and the meaning of care and food in these narratives. The topics related to phase 2 of the framework comprised the events and journey to build a community-based initiative, the way in which food narratives are negotiated within the community, the current narratives around food, and the meaning of care within these narratives. The topics related to phase 3 that were explored in the communal narrative sessions included the role of agency, the way in which these narratives flow within and between communities, and future scenarios.

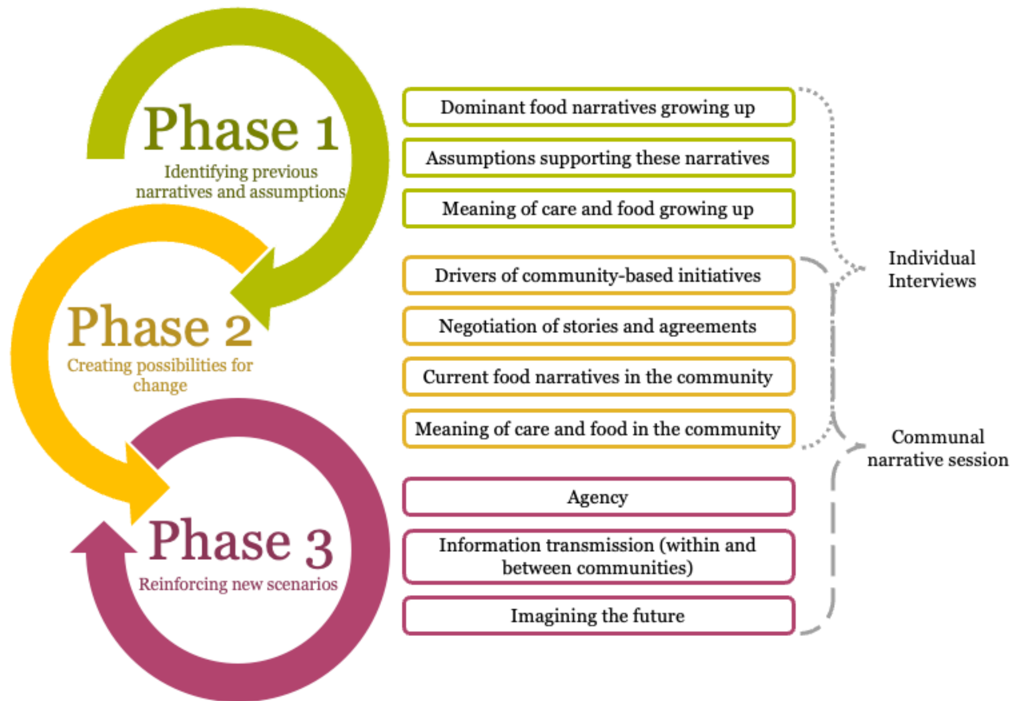

Figure 3. Application of the narrative-change framework in the topics explored through interviews and communal narrative sessions.

In the communal narrative sessions, we used a Journey Map exercise to help participants visualize their narrative journey from their childhood/family stories around food, to the current food narratives shared by the community, and we invited them to explore future narrative changes (see figure 3 (a)). In this exercise, community members were asked to select icons that represent their childhood stories (previously explored in the interviews), describe their meaning, and place them at the start of the journey map (see figure 3 (b)). They were then asked to select icons that represented their food stories now, describe them, and place them further ahead on the journey map. Participants were free to assign icons any meaning. After this, we invited them to recreate the journey to their current community narratives—including the milestones, the change in food stories, and the role of care in this journey—through images and words. This was followed by a discussion on the transmission of narratives within and between communities, the future of the community and the role of care in future food narratives.

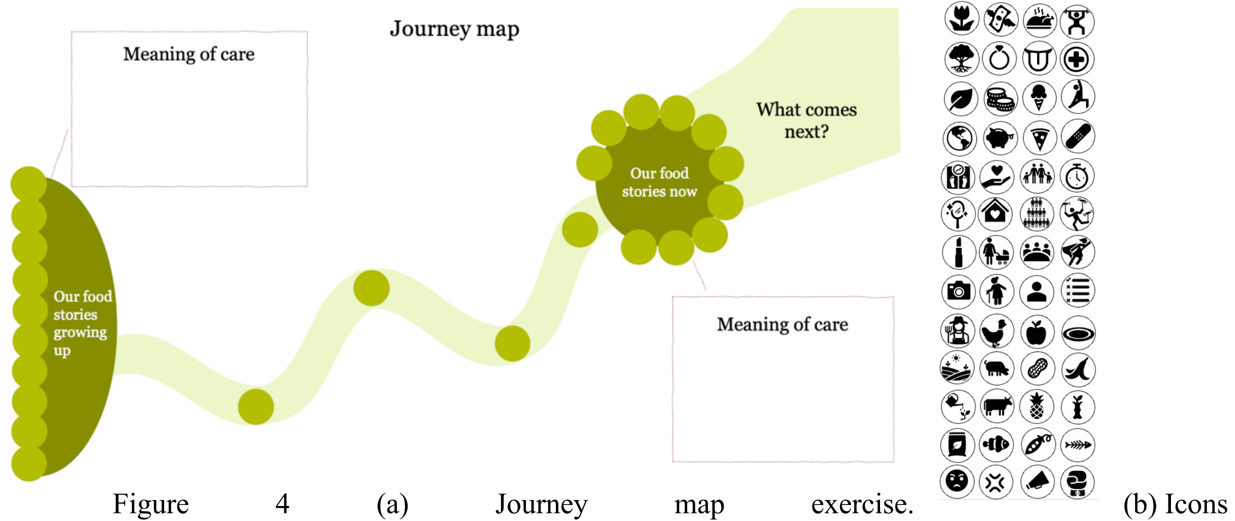

Figure 4 (a) Journey map exercise. (b) Icons

3.4. Data Analysis

Each interview and communal narrative session was analysed by looking for replications of theoretical concepts suggested in our theoretical framework, through the use of *analytic categories* (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025; Hancock & Algozzine, 2016; Yin, 2017). After carefully reading each story, we also developed *grounded categories* that did not respond directly to the theoretical concepts and emerged from the stories collected (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). We saturated each category and identified patterns (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). The software NVivo was used to categorize information to understand the narrative process in each community, allowing us to identify commonalities and differences between them. We also identified narratives representing big opportunities for narrative change in participants' behavior.

3.5. Ethical considerations

All materials and procedures used in this study were reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #45726), on November 29, 2023. Each participant received an information letter and signed an informed consent before starting the interviews and the communal narrative session. In this informed consent, we provided information about the purpose of the study, the possibility to opt out, a description of the research process, the duration of the interviews and communal narrative session, how researchers will handle information to guarantee anonymity and data confidentiality, as well as the principal researcher contact information for questions. Interviews and communal narrative sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. All the audio and transcripts were stored in a password-protected folder in the cloud. Only the researchers participating in this study had access to this information. No access was given to any other party or individual for any reason.

4. Results

We present the results of the interviews in this section following our framework, starting with the role and meaning of care in participants' childhood stories. We then move to the process of joining the community and working towards collective goals, exploring the role and meaning of care in current narratives around food, and presenting the narratives that portray how the community sees its future regarding care and food. Since these stories are shared by a small group of people during individual and group discussions, our results are not representative of a wider population. Instead, the quotes included here help to illustrate how the meaning of care is a phenomenon that emerges from everyday conversations and actions.

4.1. Identifying previous narratives: The role of care in participants' childhood stories around food

4.1.1. Care as abundance

Caring in participants' childhood stories meant providing food in abundance to guarantee both full stomachs in the short term and survival in the long term: *"I think that my mother always cared only about filling us up, because she didn't know what a cabbage or vegetables in general could be used for... she wanted to give us the nice feeling that we could eat and eat a lot."* The nutritional quality of food was unknown, and good nutrition was measured by a robust physical appearance and a lower frequency of sicknesses: *"We were very happy eating rice with pasta…and we were all big and chubby and rarely got sick."* The fertility of the land in rural areas contributed to the feeling of abundance, where food was available everywhere for free: *"We ate a lot of fruit because my grandmother lived at a farm and had fruit trees, every kind of fruit you could ever want. All you had to do was climb the tree and grab it."* Abundance represented the opposite state to scarcity and poverty, which were related to death, sickness, and violence. Yet, some participants from urban areas rarely experienced abundance during their childhood: *"There were times when we almost starved… but there were other times when my mom made this soup that we called the 'fight soup', because my brother used to spill it over, saying that it was pig food."* Growing and accessing food in urban contexts seemed more challenging, with food consumption depending on monetary resources.

4.1.2. Caring for the more-than-human to assure family survival

Since most of the study participants were born and raised in rural areas, the meaning of care in the food stories of Nashira's participants was closely linked to nature and the more-than-human world. Caring for their families implied caring for nature, given the evident dependence on their surroundings for survival. For instance, caring for the family involved raising/capturing and sacrificing animals. Seeing the women in

the household sacrificing and "skinning" animals for food was part of their day-to-day life and was normalized as a human instinct: *"you become like that by instinct… everything that bled ended up in a pot."* Sacrificing animals and making "sancochos" (a traditional stew) with them represented the provision of high-quality food for the family, a thoughtful way of celebrating special occasions, and the best way to honor a guest: *"When my aunt came to visit our farm, my mother would say, let's kill a chicken for the stew... chicken stew was the best."*

In rural areas, the interrelations and dependencies in the food production cycle were clear, and the precautions taken at every step were aimed at the wellbeing and nutrition of the family. Caring for the soil and having a proper use of water guaranteed better crops, better crops represented better food for the family and for the animals raised for food, well-cared animals became good food: *"My dad and mom taught us that we had to take good care of it [food grown] because that was what we were going to eat…all the food peels and scraps were given to the animals, and we were raised with organic food."* Caring through food implied assuring that each step of the cycle was clean and safe, through the avoidance of pesticides, the maintenance of cooking areas, and the collection of clean water *"My mom used to send us to bring water from the mountain… she was careful to wash her hands and all the kitchen utensils. My dad didn't use pesticides… I remember eating tomatoes out of the plant because they were clean."*

4.1.3. Care as honoring the elders: obedience, gratitude, and knowledge transmission

Childhood stories around food were idealized, and lessons learned from parents and grandparents were treasured. Food was the main way for caring figures like mothers and grandmothers to demonstrate affection: *"My mom always kept her four children well-fed... For her, it wasn't important that we go to the park. But it was important that we ate mashed beef broth. She never took us to the pool, but we always had chicken rice."* Food demanded most of the participants' parents' time and effort, whether it was bought or cultivated. Gratitude for the hard work around food production and obedience were valued as part of being a good family member: *"obeying our mom was a way of valuing all that she did for us. We didn't leave anything on the plate because that was what she had prepared. We also had to eat to have the strength to help her with house chores later."* Also, being a good kid implied contributing to the hard work by assuming tasks and responsibilities from a young age: "*When we were children, we were sent with aluminum pots to collect water at a mountain spring, that was our morning and afternoon task."* Traditional knowledge was transmitted in these day-to-day tasks as the best way to survive and thrive in a rural context, remaining valued and unquestioned nowadays: *"My dad used to sprinkle ash on the garden to eliminate bacteria and get rid of bugs, and since I learned this, I still use it. He also made compost with all the peels and organic waste, and we still do that too."*

4.1.4. Care as the glue that keeps the family together

In participants' childhood stories, food was the main motive for gathering. Neither luxurious dining tables nor sophisticated ingredients were needed. The food produced in the field and the company of family members was more than enough to feel the joy of being together: *"I've never had a dining table; I don't like the idea of paying a lot of money for it when I can spend that money on food. We can sit on the floor and eat from the pot; food itself means unity."* Cooking with the preferences of others in mind and pampering them through food was a way of caring and showing love: *"she [mom] used to hide the egg under the beans because she knew we liked it and wanted to surprise and pamper us."* Caring through food also meant sharing flavours tied to family traditions and enjoying the preparations of the women of the family, who kept the traditions alive: *"it was so nice to arrive at my aunt's house. She was in the kitchen, and she would welcome you with a cup of hot chocolate and buñuelos* [fritters]*."*

4.2. Creating possibilities for change: Joining the community and navigating tensions

4.2.1. Joining the community

While most of their stories start in rural areas, participants later moved closer to the city, either escaping violence or looking for better conditions for their families. In the city, they began earning a livelihood through informal and side jobs, where they proved their commitment and dedication, earning enough to support their kids: "*I asked the baker a job for three days and ended up working there for 3 years, thanks to this I was able to support my kid and enrolled him in school."* When the opportunity to join the Association of Female Headed Households arose, participants saw in it a chance to learn new skills and earn higher incomes*: "I started going to learn how to do hand-made paper, and this allowed me to gain some income without leaving my girls by themselves."*

The idea of Nashira as a female-leaded ecovillage was born from the leader and organizer of the Association of Female Headed Households, to guarantee housing and a livelihood to these women. Then, when the ecovillage project became a reality, the training and community building intensified. To join the project, each participant had to learn about and get involved in building, growing organic food, managing waste, and raising animals for consumption: *"We learned how to grow food gardens and vermiculture, we cleaned the space, prepared and fertilized the soil…everything was organic."* Also, friendships got stronger around learning, growing, and sharing food: *"we used to share a lot, we had a large stove and a clay oven where we made bread… we had a communal pot every Saturday…We had to take construction courses, so we were helping each other with homework."* During this process, participants went beyond gaining knowledge, to gain confidence and question previous versions of their own stories: *"My mom used to punish*

me a lot because of her plants, she used to say that I was harming them even without touching them... So, I started following the instructions from the university courses, but I didn't expect much... It was a great satisfaction when I received my first harvest."

4.2.2. Sharing objectives and reaching agreements

Since its beginnings, an environment of cooperation and hope has mediated the agreements achieved among the members of Nashira, especially when they share a common goal. Despite having different backgrounds and stories, agreements within the community are driven by common objectives and projects that benefit the community. Participants mention that sharing the labour and the food produced and cooked, has strengthened their bonds and fueled their intentions of working for the project: *"The first 48 of us all worked together. We would put a pot on a wood stove and add whatever we had available. We ate to have enough energy to work all day."*

Later, during the COVID pandemic, the community joined around the goal of making sure that no one went hungry: *"during the pandemic we cooked rice, beans, peas, and lentils and distributed plates to every single household. We were moving around and never got sick. Food during the pandemic was spectacular, we would set the communal pot, serve the plates, and deliver them."* Nowadays, the community has joined again to install photovoltaic panels as a source of renewable energy in their communal areas: *"Now with this opportunity, we need to join together again and reach agreements."*

4.2.3. Emerging tensions

The journey to building the ecovillage is not one without tensions, both within and outside the community. Inside the community, while the reaching of agreements around big communal goals is characterized by cooperation, everyday challenges and community life can be difficult: "*Where there is a community of more than 5 or 6 people there are already difficulties because we are not all the same and we don't think in the same way and reaching an agreement is difficult... but we still live well here, we live peacefully."* Finding a balance between the communal and the private life, and between caring for others and setting limits can be a draining task. To illustrate this, after finishing the construction of the houses, the families secluded themselves inside them, and the feeling of cooperation built around the communal pots dwindled: *"Everyone went inside their homes and stopped interacting."* Social interaction involves tensions when the time spent with the community competes with the time that should be devoted to the family. As a result, some isolate to avoid these tensions: *"we have women whose husbands did not let them participate because they argued that community work was a waste of time and a place for gossip", "some people just prefer to close the door and mind their own business."* However, dealing with everyday tensions becomes worthwhile when community members realize that big goals are achieved, guaranteeing wellbeing for everyone.

In its relationships with outsiders, the community faces tensions with free riders, who steal the food they produce. Although community members discarded the need for fences and enclosures at the beginning, they now think about fencing their gardens to keep outsiders away from their food: *"If you have a beautiful bunch of plantains they will take it because everyone can enter the ecovillage… they steal the oranges, the avocados, the guavas, whatever you produce… some of them sell this produce very cheap to buy drugs."*

4.3. Creating possibilities for change: Current stories around food and the meaning of care

4.3.1. Care as the support network that guarantees food security

In participants' current stories, food is relational and meant to be shared. Since the beginning of Nashira, the food grown is distributed or bartered with neighbours and friends: *"There is something really nice about Nashira. If I have a pumpkin and I don't have plantains, I can go to my neighbour and give her some pumpkin in exchange for plantains. When a neighbour has passion fruit, they will distribute it… whatever we harvest we share with each other."* Food preparation is shared as well to guarantee variety, lessen the workload, and strengthening bonds that go beyond food: *"We organize with our neighbours from this block so, for example, I prepare beans for everyone, another neighbor prepares rice, and another neighbor the soup and we all share…Then my neighbor receives my girls at her home and gives them lunch as if they were her own daughters. That's how we do it, we support each other in this block."* Sharing food is also the way to show love and support during the good and the bad times: *"each of us is a light and we need to share that light. Sharing food is a way to share our light here at the community… we have been for each other through the good and the bad times… whenever any of us has needed love from the community, in the toughest times, the community is there."*

Guaranteeing food access regardless of incomes is one of the main ways in which the community cares for each other. Since some people may feel ashamed to ask for help, neighbours keep an eye on each other and share food without the need of asking, strengthening the sense of belonging to a supporting community: *"I have always lived in scarcity. The difference is that I'm not on my own now, so, when I least expect it, my neighbour brings me sancocho."* Despite not living a luxurious life, there is always a way to fulfill the needs of the vulnerable: *"we know that there is a family that does not have enough food, so we keep telling them, whenever you are going to bed hungry, swing by our house and we will give you something. So, the girl usually comes, and we give her hot chocolate and bread or whatever we have."* Community members are aware of the power of joining together to help others: *"If someone is unemployed and does not have money for food, each of us brings something, like one person brings rice, the other beans, the other oil… and we complete the groceries for that family. Or, for example, each of us can bring one egg and we*

complete an egg carton for that family." The community kitchen is an organized initiative that has the support from the mayor's office and the church, an offers a space where everyone can access an affordable–or even free–meal, supporting those who have less: *"people who are able to do it, give a small contribution. Those who don't, eat for free or can make an in-kind contribution."*

4.3.2. Caring for the more-than-human to assure community wellbeing

In their interaction with the more-than-human world, participants see pollution and waste as problems they can tackle with their practices. Through their training in organic agricultural practices and their own childhood experiences growing food in rural areas, participants know that growing "clean" food is possible and better for everyone's wellbeing: *"We have never used chemical fertilizers here at Nashira, because it is forbidden… we blend garlic, chili peppers, and aloe and apply it to the plants… it is a way of caring and having healthy food."* The use of organic waste as a source of nutrients for their crops, and the initiatives for recycling non-organic waste speak to their knowledge about reintegrating waste into different cycles: *"I don't throw away anything from my kitchen, I put all the organic waste in my backyard and use it later as fertilizer", "I work at the collection centre because I care… I care about what is happening, for example, the landfill is getting full and is affecting the people who live close to it."*

As part of their training to become a self-sufficient community, participants received courses on animal husbandry. From seeing animals as a means of the family to survive during their childhood, community members now see animals as good business for the community: "*We used to have production groups, some produced chickens, others produced ducks… the ducks were good business… even the duck's beak and legs were included in the price of a pound of meat."* Only one participant mentioned seeing other species as sentient and even mentors to learn from. In her case, raising and animal to then sacrifice them implies betraying the trust of the animal: *"I'm not capable of killing a chicken... it's like betraying them... A chicken can be a good teacher. A chicken that was limping, used to lay down every day early in the morning sun and got cured. Then I was having a terrible pain, and I said, well, I'm going to do the same thing the chicken did, and it worked."*

4.3.3. Care as empowering each other through knowledge

From its beginnings, Nashira was built upon empowering women through knowledge. Community members received various lessons and courses to nurture self-sufficiency: *"To come to Nashira we had to study first…We started with entrepreneurship, then we learned about animal husbandry, then about how to care for the soil, we even learned about medicinal plants."* Women's leadership to make the best decisions for the community is never questioned as they are sufficiently prepared to take the ecovillage forward: *"Nashira is something very particular, because men learned that women are in control here... the direction is in our hands... so they haven't been able to take our place because we have always been capable of*

everything." Knowledge and grit allows the community to question traditional gender roles that come from generations above in a patriarchal society: *"We talked to her and told her that we [women] have the right to study and learn new things, so she rebelled against her husband and now she has a convenience store."*

Their traditional knowledge about food, the new information they receive from the universities and educational institutions, and a fertile land allow them to become experts in growing food: *"They taught us everything, from vermiculture to organic pest control", "I don't need to buy either oregano, onions or cilantro, I have them here!", "everywhere I throw seeds I later see plants growing."* Knowing the best ways to grow food is not only a motive for interaction, but also a source of pride and empowerment. When participants apply what they have learned, and see the results "flourishing" in their gardens, this sense of accomplishment changes their narratives about themselves: *"It changed my story about myself because I saw that I could grow whatever I wanted…For me it was very satisfactory to receive my first yield of carrots, it broke an intergenerational barrier…this has been very nice to be honest… now my dream is to have an ecological wall to collect rain water and feed my plants."* Yet, food knowledge in Nashira goes beyond the gardens. It has empowered community members to create the community kitchen, caring further for the community: *"I was thinking about a community kitchen. And two months later I got the support from the mayor's office. We didn't have anything, so I asked for a loan and my husband built it [the kitchen]. A lot of people helped to install the equipment, connect the gas, and organize everything."*

4.4. Reinforcing new scenarios: Looking into the future

Narratives about the future combine the traditional knowledge that comes from emotionally significant family members, the knowledge coming from academic institutions, what they have learned from each other, and the new technologies that can take the community closer to self-sufficiency. One relevant component of these future narratives is how renewable energy can contribute to sustainable food production and consumption. Nashira will have solar panels installed in its communal areas, producing energy for the water plant and the community kitchen: *"We will finally achieve our dream of having our own energy so we do not depend on anyone outside [the grid]…the solar panels will be installed in the community kitchen and in the water tank that will be used to irrigate the community garden."* This, like all the past projects in the ecovillage, requires community training: *"They're going to train 10 or 20 people on how the solar panels work and how to install them. They're going to give them diplomas and everything... some of those people will stay working here and others will go out and teach other communities... we're going to be a model, we're going to have the privilege of being the first."* Training and knowledge become again a source of empowerment and pride.[3]

[3] Through informal communications with community leaders and local newspapers, we learned that the 12 women from Nashira who were trained on the installation of solar panels, are now doing so in communal kitchens sponsored

This hopeful future involves uniting again as a community to work towards a common goal. The goal is to assure food sustainability, while contributing to mitigate the climate crisis: *“with everything you hear about climate change, people are now realizing about the importance of growing their own food… the longer summers, the rise of food prices, and the amount of chemicals added to food… I have faith that the community gardens will be reactivated, and people will start growing food again.”* Yet, the future success of emerging projects and the survival of the ecovillage’s ideals depends on the involvement of generations to come. The challenge is to guarantee that new generations will pick up the flag to keep improving everyone’s wellbeing, against a culture that underestimates rurality and a world that seems to move towards individualism: *“We're trying to convince young people and invite them to get involved again, so that they want to lean and care for what they plant... if we don't teach our children to care, then there will come a day when those values of helping each other, of sharing, and of being able to grow food will be lost in a world where everyone wants to live for themselves.”*

5. Discussion

In this section, we analyze the journey to narrative change, as well as the materialization of care within and beyond the community. To do so, we follow the framework presented in sections 2.4 and 3.3 (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025) to identify the assumptions in participants’ dominant childhood narratives that get questioned, and the emerging alternative narratives that set a new meaning of caring through food. We then explore the process by which this new meaning of care is transmitted within the community, and the importance of agency and empowerment in this process. We also analyze how narratives of care are expanded beyond the community and beyond food production. Finally, we argue that tensions are inherent to human relationships and community building. We suggest that - instead of being avoided - tensions must be embraced to build a better future for everyone.

5.1. Identifying previous narratives, questioning assumptions, and creating possibilities for change

5.1.1. From exclusive to inclusive communities

In participants’ dominant narratives during childhood, families were exclusive communities. An exclusive community limits its scope to the individuals who share the same characteristics - in this case

by the vehicle manufacturer Volvo. Under a circular economy approach, they install photovoltaic panels with reused vehicle batteries to provide energy for food preparation in these locations. These panels are also providing energy to grow medicinal herbs for the community and to charge the vehicles used at the waste collection center in Nashira. The article in Spanish can be found here: https://www.elpais.com.co/opinion/columnistas/eliminando-huellas-de-carbono-0343.html

blood ties – prioritizing the wellbeing and rights of those who belong to the group (Byrne, 2005). Food narratives revolved around the survival of the - mostly nuclear and sometimes extended – family, leaving less space for those who did not belong to it. Other humans outside of the family were not considered part of their *community of fate* (Levi, 2020), making interactions of cooperation, reciprocal altruism, and sacrifices with "outsiders" isolated events.

When families are displaced and must start from scratch in another location, their bonds with family members are hindered and they no longer rely on their land for subsistence. The urgency for finding means for subsistence and the uncertainty around the meaning of community and family, creates the need for establishing new networks. Our results corroborate that internally displaced people show a higher capacity for social cohesion and collective action (Tellez & Balcells, 2025). In the case of Nashira, the dominant narrative is questioned when participants decide to collaborate and care for others beyond blood ties, acting on their situation and forming a new community.

The meaning of family changes to include the women and families that share the same struggles, becoming part of the same community of fate. This expanded and inclusive family welcomes others into the group to enhance each person's capacities and reach common goals through close relationships (Aron et al., 2022). Since Nashira as a family pursues the wellbeing of everyone in the community, and food is essential to wellbeing, food narratives transcend the doors of the household to include neighbours and friends. The community acts in solidarity sharing food during the toughest times and makes sure that it reaches those who need it the most. This shows the human capacity of cooperating with non-kin others regardless of the possibility of reciprocity (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Hunt-Hendrix & Taylor, 2024; Solnit, 2010)(Carugatti & Levi, 2021).

5.1.2. From food as private to food as shared

Also, in participants' childhood narratives food was treated as a private good. When food is treated as a private good - instead of a right – those who own the food can restrict the access to it through either exclusionary rights or market mechanisms (Vivero-Pol, 2018). Our results show that, although food was occasionally shared with "outsiders", families were big enough to become the main and only group with the right to access the food produced. Since food was the result of hard work and was linked to the survival of the family, the perception of its value as a private good was stronger in participants' childhood narratives, and its accumulation - whether in yields or in stomachs - showed the success of providers and carers within the family. The land was private too, and the struggle for its privatization assured the stability of the only source of livelihood they knew. Prioritizing their family's access to food and the land that produced it was an altruistic act with genetic relatives that assured their physical security (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Nowak, 2006), only extending it to other species when these were intended for consumption.

In participants' narratives, moving to a new city or town represented being deprived from their right to food, and having to find alternative ways to access it again. Forced displacement involves abandoning the part of the family's identity that is attached to the territory. It threatens the ideal of belonging to a physical place that assures a fulfilling life (Kibreab, 1999). The access to food became uncertain until they were granted the possibility of communal spaces to grow and share wellbeing through Nashira. Then, food – which was considered a private good in the past – regained meaning as something shared. Sustainable food-based initiatives represent a community building process that connects like-minded people around the possibility of sharing knowledge and the results of their efforts (Seyfang & Elliott, 2008). The first crops and community pots in Nashira emerged from past experiences and new relationships, consolidating the group as a family that shares, assuring abundance for everyone (Kimmerer, 2024).

5.1.3. Changing the perspective around vulnerability

Although the family was aware of its interdependence - understood as acknowledging the connection of the self with a wider context (Markus & Kitayama, 1998) - caring for the more-than-human world was seen as a means for family survival, limiting the scope to a small group of humans and a one-way relationship with the environment around them. Survival depended on the hard work put on adapting the systems around them for growing food and animal production. Each family should provide for itself, and the harder they worked, the stronger and less vulnerable was the family. In this context, vulnerability was a weakness to be avoided at all costs, since it could lead to death.

This narrative is questioned when the community at Nashira gathers to tackle common challenges as an interdependent community. In an interdependent society, individuals become meaningful and complete in the connection with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Whether it is assuring food security for everyone during COVID or helping the members of the community who are facing tough times, being vulnerable is not a synonym for weakness. Instead, in this context vulnerability invites reciprocity. Network reciprocity assures that, just as we are willing to incur in acts of care for others in the community, the community will care for us when we need it (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). Also, reciprocity strengthens the possibilities of success. Within a "complex life-sustaining web", cooperation through acts of care can guarantee the success of the web as a whole (Nowak, 2006; Tronto & Fisher, 1990)

5.1.4. From patriarchal hierarchies to peer-to-peer empowerment

Our findings show that family narratives around food had a strong component of respect and honouring an unquestionable patriarchal hierarchy. Patriarchy is the culture that imposes a gender binary and hierarchy. Patriarchal hierarchy sets the masculine at the top, while praising feminine goodness, quietness, and selflessness (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). Illustrating a *large power distance* social arrangement (Hofstede, 2011), less powerful members of the family had to accept, obey, and conform to the decisions of those

higher in the hierarchy. Eating whatever was provided, independently from personal preferences, was the main way of showing respect for the hierarchy and gratitude for the family's hard work. Negotiation, understood as the participation in the process for decision making in family systems, was either not an option, or took place through one-way offers where those higher in the hierarchy set the conditions (Brett et al., 2017).

Patriarchal hierarchies were questioned since the formation of ASOMUCAF and the beginning of Nashira, with women assuming the leadership of the community. Silence was no longer a desired trait, since women were invited to express their needs, propose solutions, and build – literally and figuratively – the world around them. Later, when moving into the houses they built, it was required from women to make decisions on behalf of the community. While female empowerment through knowledge was vital in fostering participation and decision making in the public sphere, we observed that knowledge was not always enough to deal with internal family dynamics. Some patriarchal dynamics in the private space still constrained woman's transformative actions within the community, corroborating the findings of other authors (Stromquist, 2015). In response, we also observed that female community leaders had the tendency to support each other in learning how to handle private negotiations, validate their positions, and stand up for the relationships they had built within the community. Relationships where friendship became equivalent to family. This extended idea of family – which transcends the patriarchal notion of production and reproduction - meets the human need of long-term relationships of trust and closeness through sisterhood (R. Morgan, 2016).

5.2. Reinforcing new scenarios: Spreading narratives of care within the community

5.2.1. Starting conversations around needs, learning, and getting ready to act

Along with questioning dominant childhood narratives, our results show that having conversations around common concerns is vital in the emergence of alternative narratives of care (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025). Finding common concerns or common ground refers to the ability of recognizing and having a conversation around a shared belief (Stalnaker, 2002). When participants started relating with each other and finding common ground in their experiences, conversations revolved around meeting their fundamental needs and building a future for their families and themselves. Fundamental human needs are common to our species and encompass subsistence, protection, affection, understanding/knowledge, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom (Ekins & Max-Neef, 1992). While human needs are universal, the ways of meeting those needs are determined by culture and can vary widely (Max-Neef et al., 1986). In the case of Nashira, common needs like subsistence (i.e. food, shelter, and work), affection

(i.e. friendship), participation (i.e. rights and responsibilities), and understanding (i.e. learning and education) were fulfilled in a variety of initiatives, including the community and private gardens.

Conversations around food production, house building, and community development were supported by education. To foster action, community members were empowered through training, knowledge, and were given the opportunity to apply their learnings, increasing their perception of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to how much we believe in our capabilities to achieve certain goals (Bandura, 2006a). Participants' narratives show how self-efficacy built up with every new learning and became part of their identities, allowing them to better care for each other. Community members who previously thought that they were uncapable of growing food, started witnessing the growth of plants in their gardens and were able to share their produce with neighbours.

5.2.2. Acting on care concerns

As they see themselves as capable of solving their own and others' needs, community members have structured a joint narrative based on care. In this narrative, every goal achieved strengthens their agency as a group, upholding their understanding of community wellbeing and their ability to reach it (Alkire, 2008). Corroborating what has been seen in other initiatives, sustainable food practices and strong relationships aid in the expansion of care to other humans and the environment (Frankel-Goldwater et al., 2024). For instance, after the experience of growing and raising their food, a community leader organized a group to build and manage the community kitchen, serving healthy and nutritious meals for those in need. Soon, this kitchen and the community gardens around it, will be powered with solar energy. This shows the adaptive capacity of the community and the role of change agents in building bottom-up solutions by harnessing community resources (Ramos-Mejía & Balanzo, 2018).

Since needs are constantly changing, the narrative of care in Nashira also allows for flexibility, posing the community as a continuous hub for learning and innovation. The community assures their capacity to act on emerging caring concerns by staying updated and incorporating their past experiences in future initiatives. Corroborating the effects of anti-oppression models of education, Nashira shows that the initiatives emerging from communities go beyond the knowledge that is "deposited" in them. Instead, community members become co-creators and transmitters of knowledge, as they have actively test what they learn in their contexts, improved their practices based on the results, and shared their learnings with others (Freire, 2018).

5.3. Reinforcing new scenarios: Expanding care outside of the community

5.3.1. The role of cooperation

Communities of care like Nashira have harnessed the power of cooperation to reach their goals. Since this community does not function in a vacuum but, instead, as an open system that depends on a wider socioenvironmental context, community members have been exchanging knowledge with private and public organizations since its inception. Alliances with academia have allowed the community to integrate rural-traditional knowledge with organic science-based practices, guaranteeing the health of humans and more-than-humans. Also, the local government has supported the community kitchen, strengthening Nashira's food security. Private organizations have granted access and training around clean technologies such as solar panels, allowing the community to implement and maintain them. This expansion and knowledge circulation is consistent in other ecovillages around the world, where cooperation and trust relationships become vital in the diffusion grassroots innovations (Roysen et al., 2024). Additionally, external organizations that have cooperated and witnessed the materialization of care in these communities, can expand these narratives of care to the complex network they are part of, strengthening other sustainable scenarios (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025).

5.3.2. Beyond food

Although growing and sharing food are still at the root of community building in Nashira, a wide variety of initiatives and ideas have flourished from there. Under sustainability lenses, food production and consumption are not isolated and relate inevitably to waste, water, and energy management, farmers wellbeing and climate change (Viana et al., 2022). To illustrate this, what began as growing food, became community projects to compost, sort waste for recycling, re-purpose food packaging for art projects, prevent soil and water pollution through organic practices, and use water responsibly in Nashira. Lately, it has also led to installing solar panels to power communal areas and the well's water pump. Now, community leaders are ready to spread the seeds of their knowledge, by installing solar panels in other local community kitchens. The process of knowledge sharing between communities and the democratization of renewable technologies has also taken place in countries like Brazil, where just energy transitions come hand in hand with alternative ways of living (Roysen et al., 2025).

5.4. Embracing the tensions

The dominant narrative in a neoliberal economy avoids relational tensions, by promoting a transactional and reductionist view of interactions where caring needs can be solved through market alternatives (Tronto,

2017). In its "model of man", it is assumed that we are independent actors, setting – understood under neoclassical economics lenses as utility maximization - and self-mastery as the goals (Tronto, 1998). Under this narrative, recognizing our need to be cared for and dealing with complex emotions becomes a sign of weakness. Also, caring for each other through community-based alternatives becomes "too costly". Building complex community relationships based on care requires effort and emotional commitment, which contrasts with the simplicity of transactional interactions that can be finished anytime without emotional repercussions. At a deeper level, transactions and rationality under a patriarchal neoliberal system, prevent us from the suffering involved in building meaningful relationships and dealing with complex emotions (Gilligan & Snider, 2018).

Our results confirm that life in caring communities is not ideal, as it is not always rewarding or comforting (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Tronto, 1998). Instead, our findings show that community-life benefits come along with conflict and paradoxical tensions. Paradoxical tensions involve experiencing seemingly conflicting but interrelated demands at the same time (Lewis, 2000). Illustrating these conflicting but interrelated demands, on the one hand, the journey to caring communities can involve creating wellbeing and consolidating supportive relationships. On the other, it implicates going through uncomfortable discussions that not always end up satisfying everyone. The caring community must navigate these tensions, by understanding uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity as natural – and unavoidable - parts of the life they share together (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The effort involved in building relationships under these conditions brings benefits that cannot be achieved through transactions, such as compassion, solidarity, and feeling loved. Hence, building caring communities involves tensions and contradictions that must be acknowledged rather than avoided (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Since tensions are an unavoidable part of complex dynamic systems such as communities (Smith & Lewis, 2011), utopic narratives where we reach a tension-free future are unrealistic. Hence, community narratives might embrace tensions as something that makes us human and adds to the social value of organizations. Embracing paradoxical tensions can lead to creativity by fostering complex thinking and by forcing us to find balance among seemingly contradictory elements (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Also, a narrative that embraces tensions simultaneously "sees the trees and the forest", by focusing on the unique characteristics of community challenges, while fostering integration, overarching goals and joint problem solving (Smith, 2014). Finally, a narrative that embraces tensions is a narrative that makes space for self-expression as the capacity of community members to voice their differences and concerns in an environment that respects diversity and is willing to listen (Gilligan, 2014).

Conclusion

In this paper we explore how narratives of care related to food have been questioned, expanded, and transmitted within and beyond Nashira, a community-based food initiative. We trace the shift in narratives to build this caring community, by following the framework proposed by Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz (2025). Based on this framework, we start by identifying initial dominant narratives and assumptions characterized by exclusivity, privatization, patriarchal structures, and vulnerability as weakness. We identify the elements that created possibilities for a change in narratives in the process of building caring communities, as well as the alternative narratives that have emerged throughout this journey. These narratives are grounded in inclusion, shared responsibility, empowerment and interdependence. Also, alternative narratives show how personal and collective transformations take place through everyday practices of care.

New care-based scenarios are reinforced by the transmission of alternative narratives within and between communities. In the case of Nashira, the successful transmission of these care-based alternative narratives is the result of empowering the community through education, fostering dialogue, and acknowledging the community's capacity to respond to each other's needs. When participants have access to the tools and support to relate to each other through care, they begin to build narratives that aim at collective wellbeing. When these narratives expand to a broader system, they bring with them an ethics of care that resonates with our shared humanity, inspiring change.

The tensions embedded in the journey to caring communities are not obstacles but necessary elements of a meaningful community life and opportunities for creativity. Instead of seeking to eliminate these tensions, sustainable futures must embrace them by balancing what seems contradictory, honoring differences, and fostering compassion. Communities like Nashira show us that enacting care is not a perfect path, but a living and relational practice that requires effort, can be messy, and is deeply human.

This project comes with some limitations. Since narratives are stories where the deeply personal and the communal converge, it is not possible to expect these to be merely objective. The variety of meanings, experiences, and biases is what makes them unique. Also, since the time spent with the community was limited, there may be some relationships and events relative to narrative change that were missed. Yet, we tried to assure that the conversations with community members covered the most important elements of their narrative journey to caring communities. Although the results from this study are not representative of all the people living in intentional communities, they can still represent some of the challenges and narrative changes experienced by other initiatives.

Despite the above, our findings contribute to the broader research on the role of narratives in sustainability transitions. We argue that the journey to sustainability is not merely technical or economic

but also rooted in the relationships shaped by narratives. It requires us to tell new stories about who we are, who we care for, and how we live together. In doing so, we move from a model of isolated survival toward one of caring for each other -the human and the non-human – in a way that we can guarantee shared flourishing and assure a common future (Pope Francis, 2015).

Since this project was purely contextual and focused on in real-life caring practices, future research can explore the transmission of narratives of care through digital environments and its influence in every-day physical relationships. Also, it would be interesting to understand how patriarchal narratives are questioned in other - digital or physical – community environments. Future projects can also explore the impacts of these narratives on the food, waste, water, and energy management of the communities close to ecovillages like Nashira.

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General Conclusion

This thesis explores the potential of care-based narratives in the cultural transformations needed for sustainable futures. We propose that narratives of care grounded on recognition, vulnerability, empathy and respect, offer a more hopeful and empowering version of humanity. Narratives of care that acknowledge our interdependence with the human and more-than-human world can shape individual behaviors, relationships, and entire communities to address sustainability challenges. The narrative change framework proposed in Chapter 1 proves effective in identifying the unique elements that can serve as the basis for narrative change, and aids in the analysis of narrative transmission within and among social groups. Through this framework, we find that acting on care concerns can become contagious, inviting others to start conversations and act collectively, which later adds up into narratives that can permeate culture and public policy. In a self-reinforcing process, these emerging narratives can influence concerns at the individual and community level. Hence, a change in narratives for sustainability can be both a bottom-up and a top-down process.

We suggest that the role of narratives of care in sustainability is multidimensional. Narratives of care help us recognize the needs of others -in the human and more-than-human world – when interacting with them in a complex life-sustaining web, and to recognize their role in building a common future. Also, in an interconnected system, narratives of care reframe vulnerability as an opportunity for reciprocity, strengthening relationships. Narratives of care foster a context of respect and empathy that allows for a safe expression of diversity and emotions. Although the patriarchy and a neoliberal economic system fear the complexity of relationships, "unsilencing" emotions and embracing tensions can foster the resilience needed for sustainable futures. Finally, we confirmed that care involves tensions, is messy, and requires effort. Yet it is in the process of balancing tensions that we connect with each other and achieve real wellbeing for everyone.

While our findings are promising, this thesis has some limitations. The framework presented in chapter 1 is primarily theoretical but is later validated in the following chapters. In chapter 2 and 3, we approached our research questions from a qualitative methodology that aims at exploring personal and community narratives. This involves subjectivity, is limited to the information recalled by participants, and introduces variability in the interpretation of their experiences. Also, due to their qualitative nature, the results presented in Chapters 2 and 3 are not representative of a wider population. These describe the narrative change process in a small group of Colombians. Despite these limitations, the framework proposed in chapter 1 presents opportunities to be applied in a wide diversity of contexts, to understand dominant narratives that maintain unsustainable practices, and find alternative stories that can lead to sustainability. However, we must clarify that narrative change is not a silver bullet for all sustainability

challenges; it must be complemented with structural transformations in policy, infrastructure and economic systems.

Future research paths involve validating the framework across diverse cultural and geographic contexts. Since big tech algorithms can control the transmission of narratives, it would also be interesting to explore the role of these algorithms in the transmission of care-based narratives, the diverse meanings that care can gain in the media sphere, and how digital environments influence the transmission of misinformation around care. Furthermore, exploring the intersections between sustainability and caring masculinities in the narratives circulating in virtual spaces would enrich the study of narratives of care. The framework proposed in this thesis can also be applied to other sustainability domains – such as waste, water, energy or mobility – and expanded to other contexts such as cities.

This work contributes a novel framework that can aid in the change of narratives at the individual, family, and community levels. It emphasises the role of agency, every-day caring practices, and conversations, in the emergence of caring societies and sustainability transitions. By demonstrating how actions and narratives at the local level add up and expand, this research encourages collaborations between communities, academics, policy makers, and media creators. Finally, it calls for a cultural shift where shared flourishing and wellbeing are prioritized.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Changing narratives for sustainability: The framework

This study follows a framework that understands and promotes narrative change at the individual, family, and community levels (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025). The theoretical basis of this framework are the contributions of van der Leeuw and Folke (2021) regarding social basins of attraction in complex adaptive systems; the Narrative Therapy process proposed by White and his collaborators (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Morgan, 2000; White & Epston, 1990) to address emerging problems in family systems; and the Ethics of Care (Tronto, 1998, 2017), setting care as the narrative content that creates possibilities for change and strengthens new scenarios.

This framework encompasses three synchronized phases to foster narrative change, allowing the system to move towards an alternative basin of attraction shaped by narratives of care (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025). The first phase consists of the identification of the dominant story that is shaping the dynamics in the current basin of attraction. This allows to understand the assumptions that support the dominant narrative, giving it strength and keeping it "alive".

The second phase seeks to create possibilities for change by questioning these assumptions and finding unique outcomes. *Unique outcomes* are facts that contradict the dominant story and prove that alternative story versions are possible (White & Epston, 1990). Unique outcomes can come both from internal concerns or external events/relationships. Internal conversations around care can become part of our identities when we integrate them in the stories we tell about ourselves (Polkinghorne, 1991). External shocks are perturbations that threaten the stability of complex systems (Halekotte & Feudel, 2020). In the case of social systems, these can be events, experiences or relationships that alter the dynamics of the system, promoting new practices and learning. Identifying *unique outcomes* weakens the current narrative hindering its strength on the basin of attraction. Leaning about possibilities permits questioning dominant narratives. It also allows the creation of alternative stories that can generate alternative basins of attraction based on care, where the system can settle and reorganize (Carpenter et al., 2001).

The third phase encompasses the adoption, spread, and reinforcement of new narratives. After identifying alternative narratives, it is necessary to reinforce the stability of new social basins of attraction and guarantee the permanence of the system in them (Halekotte & Feudel, 2020). This can be done by reinforcing agency and promoting the transmission of narratives of care within and among system levels. Agency is the capacity of shaping what is around us to increase our wellbeing, and the potential of becoming a driving force in our own development (Petesch et al., 2005). Agency aids in the materialization of individual care concerns into action, making them visible to others and starting conversations that can add up into narratives of care. Hence, this phase consists of acting on individual caring concerns, starting

conversations that lead to collective action, spreading this conversations to wider groups where they add up into narratives, and including these emerging narratives into cultural products and public policy (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025).

Appendix 2. Narrative change for sustainability framework

This framework is founded on the Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 2014; Tronto, 1998; Tronto & Fisher, 1990), Narrative Psychology (Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986) and uses Narrative Therapy tools (Morgan, 2000; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990) to generate narrative changes towards sustainability. The framework encompasses three phases. In the first phase, the dominant narrative that shapes current system dynamics is identified. This narrative, represented by the first green arrow, is supported by assumptions that serve the regime and maintain the status quo (Foucault, 1980). This narrative works as a force that pulls the system keeping it in certain scenarios. For instance, a narrative that assumes that humans have a greedy essence can serve an economic system where profit accumulation is the way to go. This is reflected in food systems designed to increase nations' GDP and companies' profits, instead of focusing on people's nutrition and wellbeing. Within food systems shaped by this narrative, food becomes a commodity (Vivero-Pol, 2017).

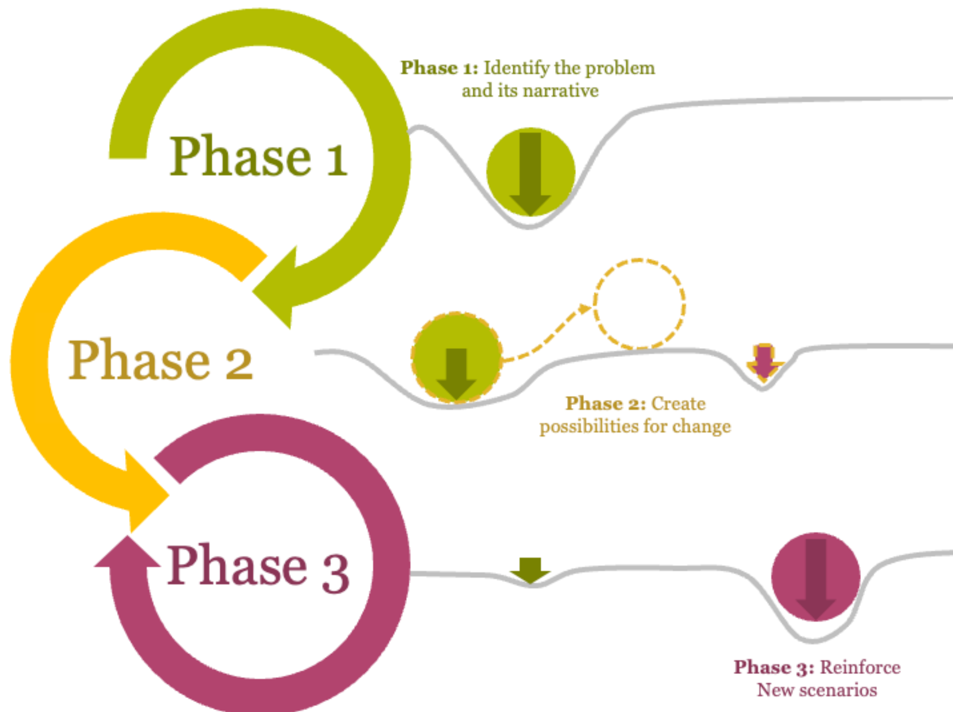

Figure 1. Narrative change framework proposed by Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz.

The second phase creates possibilities for change by questioning the underlying assumptions of the dominant narrative. To do so, it identifies the events and facts that contradict the dominant story and prove that alternative versions are possible (White & Epston, 1990). These events and facts are the *Unique Outcomes* that serve as evidence for doing things differently, by being both new and familiar at the same time (White & Epston, 1990). The Unique Outcomes that move the system out of the current scenario are represented by the dotted yellow line. The assumption of a greedy human nature can be questioned by multiple everyday examples that signal altruism and cooperation (Zaki, 2024). Human capacity of caring for others and learning to care for non-humans as kin (Desai & Smith, 2018) is a good example of an alternative story that is simultaneously different and familiar. This is an emerging story in alternative food systems that put the wellbeing of humans and the more-than-human world at their core (Beacham, 2018).

After identifying alternative narratives, the third phase encompasses strengthening and spreading them, so the system moves to an alternative scenario and stays in it (Halekotte & Feudel, 2020). This is represented by the purple circle and arrow in figure 1. Agency has an important role in narrative transmission. We understand agency as the capacity of shaping what is around us to increase our wellbeing, and the potential of becoming a driving force in our own development (Petesch et al., 2005). Through agency, people can act on their care concerns and visibly change their context. Materialized care concerns are seeing by others and become the source of conversations that can question previous assumptions. These conversations can invite others to participate actively in caring choices through cooperative agency (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). Acts and conversations can add up into narratives of care. Figure 2 summarizes the process of narrative transmission, which consists on acting on individual caring concerns, starting conversations that lead to collective action, spreading this conversations to wider groups where they add up into narratives, and including these emerging narratives into cultural products and public policy (Blanco-Murcia & Moreno-Cruz, 2025).

Transmission of narratives of care

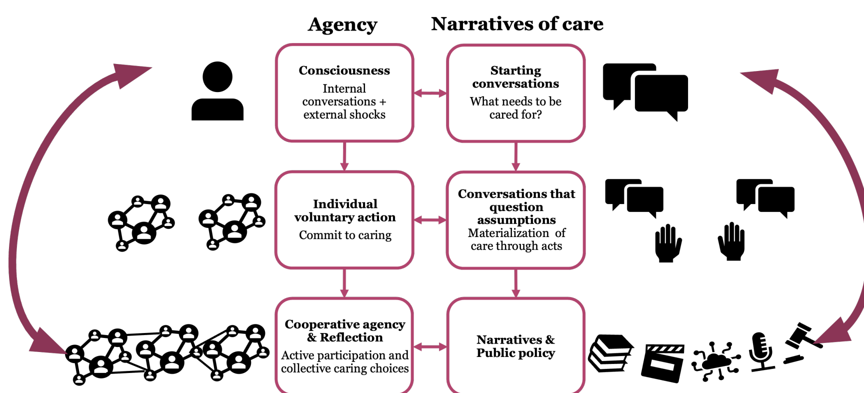

Figure 2. Transmission of narratives of care

Glossary

Agency: the freedom to pursue and accomplish our goals and values (Sen, 2000), and the capacity of acting on our circumstances and shaping the course that our lives take (Bandura, 2006b).

Autonomy or independency: refers to an orientation where each person is inherently separate from the rest and must achieve the goal of independence by following their own thoughts, feelings, and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1998).

Alternative narratives: counterplots built upon unique outcomes, experiences, or events that can be named and richly described, setting the scenario for new interactions (A. Morgan, 2000)

Care: "A species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and 'repair' our world, so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environments, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web." (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p.40)

Caring communities: the collective of humans and more-than-humans that foster each other's well-being and survival in a complex life-sustaining web.

***Community of fate**:* is the group of humans and more-than-humans that depend on each other for survival, sharing a present and a future (Carugati & Levi, 2021; Levi, 2020)

Complex adaptive systems: are systems capable of learning, reorganizing, and evolving to adapt to a changing environment (Holland, 1992). In complex adaptive systems, individual behaviors aggregate and organize into a collective, from which complex patterns and phenomena emerge (Mitchell, 2009).

Dominant narrative: a prevalent and diffused story that serves the regime by shaping behaviors (Foucault, 1980), reinforcing feedback loops that assure success to the successful (D. H. Meadows, 2008), and hindering transformative action (Fuchs et al., 2016).

Empathy: a practice that seeks to engage and deepen relationships with others. Empathy is relational, aimed at coming to know how others feel, and at understanding their life experience (Campelia, 2017).

Exclusion: rejecting or not allowing individuals to join a group, limiting their capacity to participate in internal decision-making processes, and overshadowing their rights by prioritizing the rights and wellbeing of the individuals who do belong to the group (Byrne, 2005).

Fitting-in/Sameness: involves highlighting commonalities and rejecting differences when interacting with others (Gullestad, 2002). This concept implies adjusting individual identity to fit under the expectations of the group and adopting the same principles to gain peer esteem (G. A. Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; R. Akerlof, 2016).

Inclusion: welcoming individuals to become part of our group – and ourselves – under the premise of achieving wellbeing by interacting and relying on each other. It implies that individuals who belong to a community should enjoy equal treatment and the protection of their rights (Liamputtong, 2022).

Interconnectedness or interdependency: viewing the self as part of a whole that achieves common goals through following the thoughts, feelings, and needs of others. Under this perspective, the self becomes more meaningful and complete through its relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1998).

Narratives: are stories that give meaning to the world around us, shape our experiences, and mediate our relationships (Bruner, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Rationality: In neoclassical economic terms, refers to approaching decisions through a decontextualized maximization of preferences or utility. Rationality is reductionist, instrumental, and focuses in the individual as the unit of analysis (Grossmann et al., 2020, 2025).

Recognition: acknowledging the status of group members as full partners in interactions. Misrecognition means that individuals are being deprived from participating as peers (Fraser, 2001).

Respect: treating people as autonomous agents whose interests are taken seriously. It involves giving their ideas and experiences the importance we give to our own regardless of how they differ (Schirmer et al., 2012).

***Self-expansion**:* is the human desire to enhance our capacities through loving connections and close relationships. It involves thinking about the self beyond an immediate physical context, to include in it the complexities of a wider relational context (Aron et al., 2022).

Self-expression/Uniqueness: the way in which people differentiate themselves from the group through specific characteristics and personality traits, allowing for non-conformity towards homogenizing roles and traits (R. Akerlof, 2016; Henrich, 2020).

Self-transcendence: is the quality of human existence to be open to a world full of other beings that can give meaning to our lives (Frankl, 1966).

Social attractors: An attractor is a point or set of points towards which the system evolves and accumulates (Milnor, 1985). In social-ecological systems, narratives work as social attractors, shaping interactions and basins of attraction (van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021).

Social basins of attraction: Basins of attraction are the space that comprise the trajectories of elements that move towards attractors (Nusse & Yorke, 1996). Social-ecological systems move, organize, and stabilize around basins of attraction (Holling, 1973).

Sustainability: the capacity of a community – composed by humans and more-than-humans - to create and maintain communal existence by managing resources in a way that assures the wellbeing of its members and the health of the environment that surrounds them (Virtanen et al., 2020)

Sustainable food consumption or sustainable diets: consuming foods or having diets that guarantee nutrition security for the human population, integrate and respect sociocultural traditions related to food, are accessible and support sustainable food economies, assure fair conditions for producers, protect the well-being of the more-than-human world and the health of the Earth Systems now and in the future (Blanco-Murcia et al., 2022; Burlingame, 2012; Johnston et al., 2014).

Unique outcomes: events that contradict the dominant story and show previously ignored parts of our experience, proving that other versions of the story are possible (A. Morgan, 2000)

Vulnerability: the need of being cared for at some point of our lives (Tronto, 2017). Our vulnerability makes relationships essential to survival and is at the base of creating significant relationships (Murthy, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).