Small tourism providers' stories about sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This study asks how small tourism providers use stories to make sense of their world in terms of sustainability. It elaborates on sense-making and story concepts and their relevance to sustainability; adopts an enactive research approach and multiple methods (participation, journaling, interviews, document analysis, content analysis); and explores five providers' stories about themselves, the destination, and their story for tourists. The main findings reveals that the providers make sense of their world by seeing themselves as characters in a multi-themed story in which they are fallible change agents, understanding and practising sustainability differently, whereas the government is responsible for implementing radical change. This study's novelty lies in the narrative inquiry that allows a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of tourism providers' worldviews.

1. Introduction

Small tourism providers sometimes confront difficult choices regarding sustainability, and those operating in environmentally fragile destinations can face real dilemmas. Numerous scholars have recognised the sustainability challenges of the tourism sector, including environmental deterioration, which threatens the stability of ecosystems and, consequently, human survival (e.g. Gössling & Hall, 2006). Small tourism providers who are aware of such challenges and feel responsible for contributing to the sector's sustainability can experience difficulties in acting appropriately due to diverse factors, including their limited resources and power, and conflicts between their ideals and practices (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Battisti & Perry, 2011; Cunha, Kastenholz, & Carneiro, 2020; Kornilaki, Thomas, & Font, 2019; Mihaliĉ, 2020; Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011). Environmentally fragile destinations (i.e. destinations characterised by ecosystems that are extremely sensitive to changes caused by disturbance) constitute particularly challenging situations. Such destinations pose dilemmas for tourism providers operating therein regarding their contributions to exacerbating anthropic pressure on nature.

Although scholars have discussed small tourism providers and sustainability, they have offered only partial views of providers' perspectives on their engagement in sustainability. For example, some studies have found that providers consider supportive infrastructures and institutions crucial contextual factors facilitating their engagement in sustainable practices (Ruhanen, 2013; Thomas & Thomas, 2006). Other studies have identified important antecedents of engagement in sustainability, such as providers' positive attitudes and evaluations of their

ability to overcome obstacles, their sense of power relative to government agencies and international tour operators, and their values and empathy (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003; Font, Garay, & Jones, 2016; Kornilaki et al., 2019; Power, Di Domenico, & Miller, 2017; Sampaio, Thomas, & Font, 2012; Tomassini, Font, & Thomas, 2021). Many of the investigated aspects concern tourism providers' worldviews, which are the lenses through which they see and understand the world and their roles in it (Wei, Dai, Xu, & Wang, 2020). However, a deep exploration of tourism providers' worldviews, useful for gaining a comprehensive, nuanced picture of their understanding of and engagement in sustainability and, eventually, influencing them, is missing.

I argue that explorations of tourism providers' stories can capture their worldviews, including their inner thoughts and feelings about sustainability and their engagement in it. The tourism literature is replete with stories, and some studies have considered sustainability, discussing storytelling as a possible method of promoting sustainable behaviours and working strategically for destination development (Hartman, Parra, & de Roo, 2019; Moscardo, 1998, 2017, 2022). Other studies have used life stories to investigate tourism entrepreneurs in terms of sustainability-relevant issues (Bredvold & Skålén, 2016; Lundberg & Fredman, 2012; Tomassini et al., 2021). Recently, Moscardo (2020) revealed that the relationships between stories about a destination before, during, and after the visit form so-called storyworlds, which are narrative representations of worldviews. Moscardo (2022) study combined three points of view—those of practitioners, tourists, and host communities—but did not fully consider sustainability issues. I considered practitioners' points of view, particularly the storyworlds of small

providers operating in environmentally fragile destinations and acknowledging their responsibility to act sustainably, and asked: how do small tourism providers use stories to make sense of their world in terms of sustainability?

To answer the research question, this study involved reflection on sense-making and stories based on central ideas from management literature and insights from psychology research. It considered tourism providers' stories as means for them to make sense of their world in terms of sustainability. To capture the complexity of the providers' storyworlds, I combined tourism providers' life stories, their stories about the destination, and their storytelling aimed at tourists to investigate a case of five individuals from three organisations collaborating to design a sustainable tourism experience. I examined this case by adopting an enactive research approach as a member of one of these organisations. I collected data through participation, journaling, interviews, and document analysis, and I conducted content analysis to identify the main themes, characters, roles, and practices in tourism providers' storyworlds. This study's contribution is a threefold narrative inquiry that captures tourism providers' thoughts and feelings about their self-perceived identities, roles, and practices, which either support or conflict with sustainability, and how they contextualise these identities, roles, and practices in relation to those of other relevant actors.

2. Literature review

This chapter presents the theory underpinning my investigation of how small tourism providers make sense of their world in terms of sustainability. It starts by elaborating on the process of sense-making regarding sustainability, including possible conflicts between sustainability beliefs and behaviours (Section 2.1.), and continues by explaining the relevance of stories to sense-making and sustainability (Section 2.2.).

2.1. Making sense of sustainability

Sense-making offers a way of understanding how people deal with complex situations, and it can be a useful concept for exploring small tourism providers' understanding of and engagement in sustainability. As discussed in the seminal work *Sensemaking in Organisations* by management scholar Karl Weick (1995), sense-making is a process through which we interpret and organise our understanding of our past and present experiences and form expectations about the future. This process is social, grounded in identity construction, and occurs through the continuous interpretation of contextual cues and reflection on their interrelationships and meanings (Nijhof & Jeurissen, 2006; Sutcliffe, 2018; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Sense-making is also seen as driven by plausibility (Aromaa et al., 2018; Mills, 2008; Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010; Thurlow & Mills, 2015). Some studies have argued that the plausibility aspect of sense-making is relevant to situations in which positions and decisions are taken based on inaccurate, incomplete, or conflicting information, and can help shed light on the process through which practices gain legitimacy and become acceptable (Mills, 2008; Thurlow & Mills, 2015). This is relevant to the case of small tourism providers' practices and sustainability. Indeed, sustainability is a value-laden issue involving complex and sometimes conflicting feelings and interests, and it is subject to multiple understandings of weak and strong sustainability based, respectively, on views of natural resources as substitutable or non-substitutable (Ives, Freeth, & Fischer, 2020; Neumayer, 2003).

The sense-making concept from the management literature regarding sustainability emphasises the embeddedness of related challenges and solutions and the relevance of the perceptions of individuals and groups in organisations, including companies, about their roles as change agents. Some management scholars have investigated the sense-making process in terms of sustainability (Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014; Van der Heijden, Cramer, & Driessen, 2012), sometimes

commenting on the numerous challenges caused by ambiguous interpretations of sustainability, power relations, and tensions between actors and roles (Angus-Leppan, Benn, & Young, 2010; Bien & Sassen, 2020; Corley & Gioia, 2004). Individuals' awareness of such challenges obliges them to reflect on how to balance their understandings of sustainability and sense of responsibility with their actions (Bien & Sassen, 2020). Such reflections concern their understanding of what is happening and their perceptions of who they are now and could be in the future, as individuals and group members (Bien & Sassen, 2020; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Weick et al., 2005), including their possible roles as change agents.

Change is central to sense-making and sustainability because it relates to learning, creativity, shared meaning construction, emotions, and action. The management literature has described strategic sense-making as a learning process involving scanning, interpreting, and acting (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Pandza & Thorpe, 2009; Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993) and a creative process of inventing conceptual frames in which emotions and shared meanings play a significant role (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Sutcliffe, 2018; Weick, 1988). Learning, creativity, shared meaning, and emotions are crucial for change towards sustainability (Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi, 2009). Another element underpinning sense-making and change towards sustainability is action, expressed by the enactment concept, which is based on the idea of a fundamental mutual relationship between people and the environment, highlighting the possible proactive role of individuals and groups in sustainability (Gioia, 2006; Van der Heijden, Cramer and Driessen, 2012; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Thus, sustainability sense-making in organisational contexts can be described as a process through which individuals and groups give meaning to their and others' practices while experiencing an emotionally charged and continuously evolving crisis that requires new ways of thinking and acting.

The research on sense-making in organisations during changes and crises underpins the way individuals belonging to such organisations approach sustainability-related choices. Some scholars have identified critical levers of change, such as commitment, identity, expectations, updating, and doubting (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988). Commitment can facilitate or inhibit change and, regarding sustainability and tourism, can manifest as commitment towards two sometimes conflicting interests: environmental protection and profit (Williams & Ponsford, 2009). Regarding identity, as previously mentioned, sense-making is grounded in identity construction (Gioia, 2006; Nijhof & Jeurissen, 2006; Sutcliffe, 2018; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) and, in challenging situations, existing identities may be threatened and new ones emerge. In terms of tourism, the need for identities other than the traditional profit-oriented one can arise, particularly for "green" entrepreneurs (Lundberg, Fredman, & Wall-Reinius, 2014).

The other critical levers of change—expectations, updating, and doubting—reflect the dynamism and unpredictability characterising sustainability and the consequent importance of adapting business practices to changing circumstances (Sievers-Glotzbach & Tschersich, 2019). Expectations are based on the interpretation of cues and their interrelationships, leading to the creation of meaning about the future. Critically for sustainability, expectations tend to be 'sticky': we tend to expect past patterns to repeat without significant new elements (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Thus, updating and doubting are essential for facilitating 'adaptive sense-making', which means revising interpretations based on new information and never making finite sense of any situation (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). For tourism operators, 'adaptive sense-making' can relate to the continuous review of business practices in the face of changes, such as climate change, as discussed by Becken and Wilson (2016).

The psychology literature has considered how people approach and make sense of their sustainability-related choices, besides work-related ones, based on belief/behaviour conflicts. Several psychology studies

have suggested that people react to belief/behaviour conflicts by changing their beliefs or behaviours and/or justifying their actions, sometimes in comparison with those of others (Dono, Webb, & Richardson, 2010; Fritsche, Barth, Jugert, Masson, & Reese, 2018; Hornsey, 2008; Weder, Tungarat, & Lemke, 2020). For small tourism providers, such belief/behaviour conflicts can involve limitations regarding the facilitating contextual and individual factors mentioned in the introduction. Belief/behaviour conflicts characterise the dilemmas experienced by responsible tourism providers operating in fragile destinations and can be viewed in terms of complex interactions between the social roles of providers and other relevant actors (Brown, 2000, 2020; Willemsen, Newen, & Kaspar, 2018).

Tourism providers, who consider themselves change agents and responsible group members, can experience belief/behaviour conflicts when their practices increase pressure on an already fragile environment. How they face such conflicts, either by changing their beliefs or behaviours or finding justifications that allow them to maintain positive self-images, contributes to tourism providers' worldviews, which, as argued in this paper, can be investigated by referring to their stories.

2.2. Stories and sustainability

A well-established tradition in the management and psychology literature links sense-making to stories, considering the latter an important mechanism through which people, as tellers and interpreters of their experiences, understand the world (e.g. Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008; Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012; László, 2008; McAdams, 2011, 2021; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). In psychology, the concept of narrative identities refers to internalised evolving stories that are relevant to people's processes of making sense of their lives, including reconciling who they imagine they are and would like to be with who they are and can be in the specific contexts in which they live and work (McAdams, 2011). In this literature, life stories are seen as developing through the dimensions of structure (facts, context, and the time sequence of episodes) and motivational/affective themes and reasoning, providing meaning, purpose, and continuity to people's lives (McAdams, 2019; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean et al., 2020). These narratives are not factual but integrate people's reconstructed past and their imagined future (McAdams & McLean, 2013), which resonates with the management literature view of stories as creative redescriptions of the world (Humphreys & Brown, 2008; Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012; Patriotta, 2003; Thurlow & Mills, 2015). Some management scholars have related sense-making to narrativisation, defined as a process that "permits nuanced investigation of the extent to which individuals in a work team agree, share, disagree and contest understandings" (Brown et al., 2008, p. 103).

These reflections on sense-making and narratives are relevant to this study especially regarding tourism providers' dilemmas based on belief/behaviour conflicts and their roles as change agents. Such dilemmas can be discussed by referring to the concepts of epistemic impasse and spillover from the management literature on change and stories. Both concepts derive from the idea of episteme as a set of beliefs, knowledge propositions, and practical relations underpinning our ways of thinking, talking, enabling, and legitimising our discourses and practices (Islam, 2013; Srinivasan, 2017). Islam (2013) used the concepts of epistemic impasse and spillover in the context of sense-making stories and change to indicate, respectively, situations in which phenomena are framed in incompatible ways and the mechanism through which individuals recognise this inadequacy and try to make sense of it. Islam's main point was that stories can "serve as mediating mechanisms to work between and patch over differences between different epistemic frameworks" (2013, p. 43). Ultimately, stories can lead to the modification of the existing episteme, the creation of a new episteme, or the development of diffuse projections of possibilities. Therefore, epistemic impasse and spillover can explain the importance of stories in justifying tourism providers' belief/behaviour conflicts and their transitions from

understanding and making sense of complex sustainability crises to acting in specific ways.

Regarding the role of change agents, various streams of literature have argued that stories not only have sense-making functions but also have consequences for role perceptions and change. This is evidenced by educational literature's increasing use of stories (Molthan-Hill, Luna, Wall, Puntha, & Baden, 2020; Uhrqvist, Carlsson, Kall, & Asplund, 2021) comprising structural components (e.g. characters, context, and turning points), qualities for impact (e.g. identification, imageability, and problem resolution), and transformation prompts (e.g. regarding ideology, metaphor, and/or identity; Wall, Rossetti, & Hopkins, 2019). Stories about actions leading to sustainable futures provide important ideas and insights into desirable practices, fostering feelings of empowerment and becoming inspirational sources of change in organisational, educational, and social change contexts (Fischer et al., 2016; Luks, 2014; Millar, Hind, & Magala, 2012). For example, Veland et al. (2018) discussed stories and climate change, arguing that stories can move people to act by focusing on agency and opportunity rather than on dry fact-based foresight about dystopian futures. This potential has been acknowledged in tourism studies on storytelling that targets tourists (Moscardo, 2015, 2022).

Based on the view of stories as an important mechanism for sense-making, several studies have used narrative approaches, particularly life stories, to investigate the individual and collective identity constructions of entrepreneurs and other business practitioners in tourism (Bredvold & Skålén, 2016; Lundberg & Fredman, 2012; Tomassini et al., 2021). Unlike these studies, I argue that a threefold approach is necessary to capture the complexity of sustainability understanding and engagement. Thus, I used narrative inquiry to explore tourism providers' stories about themselves, the destination in which they operated, and the story they developed for tourists.

3. Methodology and methods

This study relied on a constructivist narrative inquiry methodology that appreciates multiple truths and realities and relies on mutuality between researchers and researched (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). On such basis and aiming to investigate the stories through which tourism providers make sense of their world in terms of sustainability, I adopted an enactive research approach and focused on a project in which I participated as a member of a non-profit organisation. The enactive approach resembles autoethnography and action research and consists of the researcher fulfilling the temporary role of practitioner (Fletcher, 2011; Johannisson, 2018, 2020). In this study's specific case, such an approach consisted of me taking the role of a tourism experience designer, and, through such an active role, gaining an insider perspective on tourism providers' worldviews.

The project in question responded to a call for companies to design sustainable 'green' experiences (March–September 2021) at a destination that can be defined as fragile due to clear signs of climate change affecting the local nature and considerable challenges relating to pollution (transport and littering) and wildlife disturbance. Our pilot project involved collaboration between a non-profit organisation (two individuals, including a marine biologist/guide and myself), the tourism company leading the project (one individual—a head of research and education responsible for guest relations and marine ecology), and a food-production company offering tours (two individuals, including the operating manager—a circular-economy economist—and a marine biologist/guide). The sample was limited in size (5 participants including me), as often the case in qualitative narrative studies investigating homogenous groups or/and first-person accounts (Riessman, 2008; Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020; Bredvold & Skålén, 2016). The project participants were assured of anonymity in this paper; therefore, any information that might reveal the identities of the project participants (other than the author), including their organisations, details of the project, and the destination (indicated as 'D'), has been omitted.

In line with the narrative inquiry and sense-making literature and the enactive research approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Johannisson, 2018; Jørgensen, Jordan, & Mitterhofer, 2012), I combined various data collection methods: participation in relevant activities, document analysis, and qualitative interviews. Together with the other project participants, I prepared the application for funding, designed the tourist experience, developed the post-visit survey targeting tourists, and drafted the final report. I attended seven meetings with the three organisations and three meetings with the non-profit organisation and the company leading the project. During the meetings, which were held online and lasted approximately one hour each, I took notes, which I collected in a journal. I derived additional data from a shared document updated after each meeting with the main discussion points and decisions, and I conducted individual interviews with the project participants (October–December 2021). I chose a narrative inquiry approach to investigate the participants' sense-making. This choice aligned with tourism studies on small firms (Bredvold & Skålén, 2016; Lundberg & Fredman, 2012; Tomassini et al., 2021; Tomassini, Font, & Thomas, 2019) and was supported by Perey (2015) study, which argued that narrative inquiry is particularly valuable for appreciating how people make sense of complex sustainability challenges.

I conducted the data analysis in two phases. In the first phase, I classified the data as reported in the first column of Table 1, derived from the sources shown in the second column, in order of relevance. The three components (life stories, story about the destination, story for tourists) are concepts that are well-established in the tourism literature, and this study's underlying idea is to consider them as the building blocks of storyworlds. The third column in Table 1 refers to the content analysis of the data. I based the coding on the main story elements, such as the characters, the context, and the change (McLean et al., 2020; Wall et al., 2019). Regarding the life-story interviews, which followed the open-ended process suggested by Lundberg and Fredman (2012), I derived relevant codes from the literature concerning entrepreneurs and engaged tourism operators (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Font et al., 2016; Tomassini et al., 2021). For the tourist-oriented story, which emerged during the meetings and was summarised in a script for the guides, I identified transformation prompts and the qualities of impact relevant to understanding providers' storytelling intentions (Moscardo, 2020; Wall et al., 2019). The third column of Table 1 provides examples of the coding process. In the second phase of the analysis, I used the coded material to identify the main themes and storylines and gain a complete picture of the providers' storyworlds that, as argued above, based on Moscardo (2020) and supported by scholarly contributions from the psychology and management literature (Brown et al., 2008; Colville et al., 2012; McAdams, 2011, 2021), can be understood as narrative representations of their worldviews.

3.1. Methodological reflections

Since narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and due to my involvement in the project, it was necessary for me to reflect on my motivations, role, legitimacy, relationships with the other participants, and influence on the research results (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005; Bertella, 2022). I initially proposed collaboration between the non-profit organisation to which I belong and the two companies, because I thought that it would provide diverse benefits for our organisations and a new 'green' product for the destination. My proposal was also based on the belief that we, the project participants, had some common characteristics. We were all women from countries other than the destination country and were passionate about tourism and nature. We shared a similar understanding of sustainability, characterised by a marked emphasis on the environmental dimension. My legitimacy in the project was derived from my role in the non-profit organisation and, secondarily, my affiliation to the local university. From the start of the project, I discussed with my partners the possibility of using the project in my academic work. Besides having good knowledge of the non-profit organisation, of which I have been an active member for several years, I knew the companies relatively well due to previous studies in which organisational representatives participated as co-researchers. Apart from one individual, I personally knew all the project participants. This helped build the necessary trust for investigating possible tensions between the providers' concerns about and sense of responsibility for sustainability and their practices. Moreover, such relation led to a shared engagement in the development of the storyworld, and all project participants read the first draft of the Findings section and commented on it, something that contributed to both data saturation and validation.

Regarding my influence on the research results, it is important to point out that my own stories were included in the data set. I could not exclude my contribution because the story targeting tourists was developed collectively. For the stories about the destination and my life story, I included my data in the form of two journal entries in line with the understanding of reflexivity as an introspective process (Finlay, 2002). To increase the study's trustworthiness and to provide a faithful representation of the providers' worldviews, my partners read the early drafts of this paper, and I considered their feedback on the drafts in writing the final paper. To increase research transparency, an asterisk is used to indicate quotations and considerations derived entirely or partly from the personal elements of the data set.

4. Findings and discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the main findings about tourism providers' use of stories to make sense of their world in terms of sustainability. All the investigated people, including myself, are referred to here as tourism providers. The chapter starts by presenting the providers' life stories and continues with their stories about the destination and, finally, the story they designed for the tourists (Section 4.1). It then describes how these stories shaped a storyworld representing the providers' worldview, which can be understood as the narrative place in which the providers made sense of their world (Section 4.2).

4.1. The providers' stories

4.1.1. Life stories: who are we?

The providers all claimed to be concerned and passionate about the natural environment, and I noted some similarities with lifestyle and engaged entrepreneurs (e.g., Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Bredvold & Skålén, 2016; Tomassini et al., 2021). Providers reported that their

Table 1
Examples from the first phase of the data analysis of the providers' stories.

	Data Sources	Coding (content analysis)
Life stories	I, P	*Characters*: providers *Characters' profiles*: concerned, passionate (*values, emotions*), educated (*education*) *Context and change*: tourism-related job as the context for engagement (*engagement*) in issues perceived as requiring changes at the individual and collective levels (*agency*)
Stories about the destination	I, P, D	*Characters*: tourism companies (small/large, local/non-local), tourists, destination management organisations, government *Context and change*: destination as the setting for local changes towards sustainability; few signs pointing to radical change (*resistance to change*)
Story for tourists	P, D, I	*Characters*: tourists, companies *Context and change*: tourism experience as the context for turning recreational/entertainment activities into learning life-changing experience as 'it should be' (*ideological transformation prompt*)

D = documents, I = interview, P = participation.

cognitive and emotional engagement in environmental issues influenced their choices of jobs and leisure activities; for example, commenting on her job and her concern for the environment, one provider said, "I'm an economist … but a circular-economy economist. Profit is necessary for companies, but taking care of the environment is the first step if you really want to contribute something positive".

The line between job and leisure interests and activities was blurred, and providers' reports of their fervent desire to contribute to a more sustainable world reflected sustainability empathy as a lifestyle (Font et al., 2016). This was particularly true for the providers working as guides and those (*) who mentioned activism while broadly discussing their engagement in tourism and environmental causes. Such engagement can be described as a form of sense-making enactment and identity building (Gioia, 2006; Nijhof & Jeurissen, 2006; Sutcliffe, 2018; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Especially in the context of activism, the interplay between providers and their environment was accompanied by a firm belief in agency, a commitment to responsible behaviours, and, in some cases, a moral obligation. This was evident in the following statement by a provider: "We just can't continue to do things as we did before in our parents' generation. It would be wrong".

The providers' agency and responsibility related to their knowledge because the latter can trigger and reinforce the former. All providers reported having good levels of formal education (a master's degree or PhD) and experience in education in different contexts (school, university, leisure activities, and/or tourism). The providers' knowledge was noted in the project application, which highlighted the participants' educational backgrounds and the educational dimension of the designed tourist experience. This reminds us that values-based tourism operators are often intellectuals and educators (Tomassini et al., 2021). Like such operators, the individuals in the current study described themselves as people who had been exposed to diverse experiences through travel and living abroad. They associated knowledge not only with formal education but also with various life experiences that, in the words of one provider, "can help a person better understand our society's challenges and be more open to alternative ways of living and doing things". From the providers' perspective, knowledge, particularly an understanding of the scope of environmental challenges, such as climate change, led to a marked sense of responsibility and, as one interviewee commented, an "urge to do something".

Providers commented openly on this 'urge' and mentioned sustainability concerns conflicting with certain aspects of their practices in either their jobs or their personal lives, which, in some cases, resembled the tension between environmental protection and economic interests observed in the tourism literature about nature-based tourism entrepreneurs (Lundberg et al., 2014). A few providers reported guilt and self-criticism about being hypocritical, but also displayed tolerance of their own and tourists' behaviours when talking about their use of transport. This is shown in the following excerpts:

> There are too many tourists in D … and the fact that I'm part of the sector … attracting people up here … coming by plane or cruise boat … is constantly on my mind. … I worked in other destinations before, but I didn't feel nearly the same level of guilt!

> I could be a bit hypocritical and say: "The tourists come up here to look at nature", but … I understand their curiosity. … I also think that there are too many tourists, but … I'm also here. … I could say, "I can be here because I'm a scientist and I have the right to be here". Yes, although it's true that I'm a scientist … still … for the environment it doesn't make much difference: tourist or scientist … there are still too many people. … It's difficult and I'm a bit torn about it.

> I love to travel … so I'm not so different from the tourists in D. … I travel to meet friends and visit my family … or just … to see places. … I mean … it's great that we can afford to travel … but it's not good for the environment to use planes. In D, tourists arrive by plane or cruise boat … not really the most environmentally friendly way to travel … but how can I blame them?

As shown in these excerpts, the providers reported tension between their sustainability concerns and practices, commenting on certain peculiarities of the destination, and the stories they told highlighted specific challenges, existing power imbalances, irresponsibility, hypocrisy, and resistance to change. Several aspects of these challenges were mentioned during the various meetings and interviews. An example is a provider who commented on the economic importance of tourism for the local economy, but also reported the town being "invaded" by tourists to the extent that residents "feel like animals in a zoo".

4.1.2. Stories about the destination: how do we view D?

The challenges were commented on in terms of the power relations among the various relevant actors. More precisely, in line with studies on small companies (Kornilaki et al., 2019; Thomas & Thomas, 2006), responsibility and social identities, and roles (Brown, 2000, 2020; Willemsen et al., 2018), the providers (*) commented on the dominant role of a few major actors who virtually monopolised the sector for their own benefit. This was presented as a plausible explanation (Mills, 2008; Thurlow & Mills, 2015) for small companies having limited possibilities to develop and implement new ideas, including ones that might lead to improved sustainability. During one interview, such a limit was mentioned regarding the pilot project and a particular major tourism actor "imposing some conditions (…) on our project".

Irresponsibility was a feature in the providers' stories regarding the behaviours of some operators and the government. In line with studies on narrative identities, moral justification, and belief/behaviour conflicts (McAdams, 2011, 2021; Weder et al., 2020), the providers reported, critically but tolerantly, their own and the tourists' unsustainable behaviours, such as travelling by non-environmentally friendly transport. In contrast, they described the behaviours of some companies and the government with frustration and disappointment. This was evident when the providers talked about resistance to change, referred to in one interview as "business-as-usual thinking". From the providers' perspective, certain actors, particularly powerful tourism actors and the government, engaged only marginally and/or superficially in long-term strategic sustainability, especially regarding the natural environment. The destination story was a story of hypocritical greenwashing. Some providers condemned this aspect very harshly and sometimes described it with bitter irony. During one interview, a provider talked about certification and said, laughing, "Come on! D is not a sustainable destination! It's a lie! The number of tourists exceeds the number of residents, and … we dump waste in the sea! Hah hah … sustainable?!"

Some providers commented on the hypocritical communication used by some tourism actors who "distract" tourists by giving them "a postcard experience" (*) that, presumably, they expect and that is less problematic than the reality of a natural environment threatened by human activities, including tourism. As one provider stated:

> Some operators point at a glacier … that is much smaller than is used to be, but don't tell this to the tourists. … They just turn and point in another direction, shouting, "Look over there: a [wild animal]!" and the tourists are happy.

Resistance to change emerged in the providers' stories about the destination and the COVID-19 crisis, which was viewed as a missed opportunity for radical improvement. The providers reflected on the necessity to review business practices as a form of adaptive sense-making (Locke et al., 2008; Sievers-Glotzbach & Tschersich, 2019), by which they meant making sense of a new reality and the problems that the crisis revealed. They commented critically on what they saw as a lack of such capacity by most operators. They considered the operators' expectations to be 'sticky' based on the assumption that the future will be like the present and therefore not require any significant change in

their practices (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This was evident in the following interview excerpts:

> The crisis has forced us to ask ourselves some questions, doubt the way things were done, and adapt to a new reality. … It seems that for many operators it [the crisis] is just a temporary challenge that we will overcome … to go back to how things used to be.

> There have been talks about rethinking tourism in D. … There is a new strategic plan … and there are positive signs of the destination management organisation taking sustainability seriously … but I really doubt that they will limit the number of tourists … so the problem remains.

The providers' stories about the destination also included a desirable future (McAdams & McLean, 2013) characterised by agency, collaboration, and government responsibility. Describing this desirable future, the providers tended to think in terms of sense-making as a collective process involving like-minded people collaborating based on a shared vision and aiming to learn how to move towards sustainability (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Thomas et al., 1993; Weick, 1988). The pilot project in which the providers participated was an example. The providers described a desirable future for the destination in terms of the sense-making element of strategy (Pandza & Thorpe, 2009), linked to the expectation that, due to its social role, the government should take greater responsibility (Willemsen et al., 2018). From their perspective, the government's role was to strategically direct the sector towards a strong sustainability future that would prioritise the protection of the natural environment. As observed in other studies on small companies (e.g. Ruhanen, 2013), government intervention in structural changes appears to be the one prerequisite for a sustainable tourism sector, and the providers' stories revealed it was a turning point in the story about the destination.

4.1.3. Story for tourists: what do we tell the tourists?

Perceiving government intervention as a prerequisite for strong sustainability and the fact that major actors have more power than small operators, the providers were particularly concerned about the story and, more generally, the experience they designed for tourists. Presumably, this was because they felt that they controlled the design process, whereas they perceived structural change as outside their sphere of influence. During the project meetings, the designed tourist experience was considered an opportunity to provide a potentially transformative experience, leading to more sustainable lifestyles for tourists and their communities. The tools used to design the experience included storytelling, dramaturgical curve, sensory stimuli, and post-visit action resources. The view of tourists as 'green ambassadors' underpinned a shared understanding of the tourism experience as an inspirational experience, reflecting the literature on experience design and sustainability (e.g. Moscardo, 1998, 2017, 2022). During the interviews, the providers acknowledged that, realistically, not all tourists enjoying the designed experience would be influenced and inspired by it. Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of tourists as 'green ambassadors' was rooted deeply in the providers' thinking and the view of companies as role models, as clearly stated in the project application:

> The main idea is to engage tourists in experiencing D … so that they can perceive the beauty and vulnerability of this environment. With regard to the latter, the commitments that our organisations have made in terms of green technology, a circular economy, and research are meant to set a good example for tourists and other companies.

Like other educational stories about sustainability (Molthan-Hill et al., 2020; Uhrqvist et al., 2021; Wall et al., 2019), the story targeting tourists was ideological, and its transformation prompt related to identity—namely, an identity as a responsible agent of change. This was evident in the understanding of tourists as 'green ambassadors', and, as suggested in the previous quotation, could also refer to tourism

operators. This emerged in meetings and interviews, where the possibility of change towards more sustainable practices was often connected to the expression "If we can do it here [in a challenging context], it can be done everywhere else". This expression reflects the concept of enactment in the sense-making literature (Gioia, 2006; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Enactment involved tourism actors' interactions with the environment—particularly their design of a tourist experience to potentially promote sustainable lifestyles and business practices that benefit nature. Sense-making enactment can also refer to tourists who, from the providers' perspective, make sense of their vacations as life-changing events with potentially important effects on their own communities.

4.2. The providers' worldview

Combining the stories about the providers and the destination with the story targeting tourists, the providers' storyworld emerged as a comprehensive narrative about their worldviews. As argued in the first part of this paper, such a narrative allows for an understanding of tourism providers' engagement in sustainability to a greater extent than the partial views of engagement that previous tourism studies have focused on. The worldview by this study's providers incorporated a dominant episteme with signs of spillover towards an alternative episteme (Islam, 2013). Such epistemes concern diverse types of sustainability (no, very weak, weak, and strong sustainability; Ives et al., 2020; Neumayer, 2003). In Fig. 1, the two ovals represent the two epistemes, with the main themes presented in the previous sections reported in italics. Among this storyworld's structural components, the main characters are outlined in bold, and their roles as villains, change agents, victims, and heroes are specified.

The left side of the figure shows the dominant episteme concerning beliefs and practices that support no, weak, or very weak forms of sustainability. Such an episteme is characterised by what the providers' stories described as greenwashing and incremental changes. These practices are associated with business-as-usual thinking and a lack of adaptive sense-making. Within such an episteme, the path to sustainability relies on the underlying understanding of nature as a valuable tourist attraction. The major themes surrounding the oval in Fig. 1 represent this episteme. Regarding the government and some tourism operators, these themes were *irresponsibility*, *power imbalance*, *resistance to change*, and *hypocrisy*. In terms of story characters, the government and certain operators were positioned as villains, with local nature as the main victim.

The presence of villains and a victim reflected the dramatisation of the power imbalance that caused the providers' *concern*, *disappointment,* and *frustration*, which are the other themes surrounding the dominant episteme of no, weak, or very weak sustainability. These themes are listed immediately after the aforementioned themes, on the left of Fig. 1, and were referred to by the providers, who, while not sharing a view of sustainability that aligned with such an episteme, acknowledged their own hypocrisy. Unlike the hypocrisy of some tourism operators and the government, it was tolerated, albeit with a *sense of guilt*, and accepted as a contradiction that was difficult to overcome. This aspect made the providers far from the heroes and closer to the profile of 'green ambassador' tourists, with whom they shared an important role in possible change towards an alternative episteme.

An alternative episteme to the dominant one is shown on the right of Fig. 1. The dashed lines show that such an episteme emerged from the providers' stories about a desirable future for the destination. This episteme was influenced by the providers' understanding of sustainability, which emphasised the environmental dimension. Nature was considered valuable for humans and other forms of life, and worth protecting. This episteme had the major theme of *responsibility*, with the most influential character being the government, which was seen as potentially playing an active role in regulating the sector. In the story, the government played the role of the hero of change, supporting an
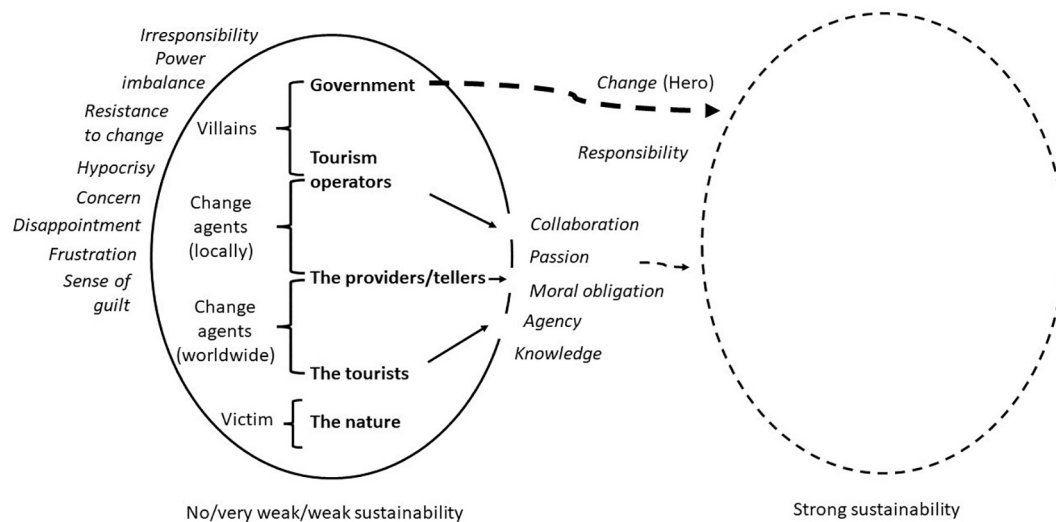
Fig. 1. Providers' worldviews: the dominant and the alternative episteme linked by possible change paths.

envisioned, desirable future. Thus, the mechanism leading to such an alternative episteme depended on this changed government role and, as mentioned, involved the providers and tourists as local and worldwide change agents. Important themes relevant to such a mechanism were *collaboration, passion, moral obligation, agency*, and *knowledge*.

Overall, the providers' stories indicated a worldview in which change towards strong sustainability was achievable, appropriate practices could be developed, and roles and identities could be constructed through enactment. The epistemic impasse of partly contributing to a set of beliefs and practices that the providers did not share was overcome by a spillover mechanism. The latter consisted of an imagined change in the government's role and, simultaneously, in the operators' responsible practices, such as applying green solutions to their businesses and designing transformational experiences that could promote strong local and global sustainability. Far from perceiving themselves as exceptional individuals, providers recognised the inconsistency in some of their behaviours. This enhanced the realism of the ideological aspect of the main storyline, making the change towards strong sustainability more plausible, as promoted by the tellers who, although referring to themselves as possible role models, did not elevate themselves to the level of heroes.

5. Conclusion

In this study, I asked how small tourism providers use stories to make sense of their world in terms of sustainability. I applied an enactive research approach and multiple methods to explore the storyworld (i.e. the narrative representation of worldviews) of five small tourism providers operating at an environmentally fragile destination. The findings revealed a multi-themed storyworld incorporating conflicting epistemes relating to both weak and strong sustainability. The themes included responsibility/irresponsibility, power imbalance, resistance to change, hypocrisy, concern, disappointment, frustration, sense of guilt, collaboration, passion, moral obligation, agency, and knowledge. The observed conflict mirrored the tension felt by the providers between their sustainability concerns and their practices, which led to an epistemic impasse. The latter was partly resolved by the providers' stories through a spillover mechanism that involved the providers as critical but not flawless agents of change towards strong sustainability, positioning the government as the main actor responsible for and capable of promoting radical change.

This study's novelty lies in its methodological contribution, which is the use of narrative inquiry, combining three types of stories to explore providers' understanding of and engagement in sustainability. The

empirical analysis showed that the providers' stories about themselves and the specific destination, and the story they design for tourists, can be considered the building blocks through which they create their storyworlds, which represent their inner thoughts and feelings about themselves, their organisations, and, more generally, what the tourism sector is and could be. Such storyworlds provide a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the roles and expectations that providers assign to various actors, including themselves, and that underpin the modality and extent of their engagement in sustainability practices. Compared with the concepts and frameworks applied in other studies to examine specific aspects of providers' personalities, attitudes, and behaviours, the proposed threefold narrative approach, the potential of which was strengthened in this study by a methodology facilitating deep empirical investigation, covers to a greater extent their cognitive and emotional spheres, shedding light on their worldviews and, particularly, on the changes that they hope for and work towards. The dynamism inherent in stories is relevant to sustainability. The structural components of stories include a turning point, which, in this case, is a change towards sustainability. This dynamic element applied to sustainability engagement by tourism providers adds to the extant literature about tourism stories that, although quite extensive, mainly focuses on storytelling, experience design, and life stories without exploiting the potential of stories for sense-making and their relevance for contextualising desirable changes towards sustainability.

Regarding practical implications, some considerations refer to the underlying dilemma faced by engaged providers in environmentally fragile destinations and their expectations about governments taking a more active role in regulating the tourism sector. In this study, such expectations were evident in the change of the government's role from villain to hero in the providers' stories about desired change. Grants awarded to tourism companies, such as the one funding the project that supported the empirical part of this study, can help in establishing and/ or reinforcing collaborative relationships among relevant actors and across tourism and non-profit sectors to implement more sustainable products. Still, providers expect broader changes to occur at the government level. In extreme situations, providers' perceptions of deficient government regulations can limit their engagement in sustainability due to opportunism and/or an intrinsic sense of unfairness and/or resignation. Thus, this paper strongly recommends the development and implementation of regulations regarding, for instance, certification and permits, the establishment of protected areas, and limitations on the overall number of tourists for environmentally fragile destinations to both support and control tourism providers.

The case I investigated involved individuals with common

characteristics, which may have led to a few limitations. They had similar views on sustainability that they couched in strong terms, which underpinned a shared worldview. Future studies could explore the worldviews portrayed in the stories of actors with different views on sustainability to provide a more complete picture of possible epistemic impasses and spillover mechanisms, and to reveal how different (harmonious or adversarial) worldviews coexist. Another common trait of the individuals in this study was that they were women and not originally from the destination in which they operated, which might have influenced their understanding of the context and their role in it. For example, regarding their origins, the findings suggested that the providers saw some communalities between themselves and the tourists. Future studies could include people with more varied genders and backgrounds. In particular, the inclusion of local providers, such as representatives of possible Indigenous communities, might reveal different stories in which resident communities that had a rather marginal role in this study might play a more prominent role. This could be particularly important for reflections on the interaction between the environmental dimension of sustainability and the economic and sociocultural dimensions.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No interest to declare.

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