How do people discursively construct their meaningful encounters with nature?

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Abstract

Everybody encounters nature and discusses their experience differently. Thereby it is of interest to understand how people construct meaningful nature encounters. Past research has qualitatively studied specific kinds of nature encounters and studied their effect on psychological states quantitatively but has not focussed on the way people discuss nature encounters. Stemming from social constructionism, Discourse analysis is used to analyse how language is used to construct meaning while considering the sociocultural context. The research question is: *How do people discursively construct their meaningful encounters with nature?* This paper studied the discursive constructions of 37 nature encounters of 18 participants. The data are interview excerpts in which the participants described their meaningful encounters with nature. A total of 8 different types of discursive constructions of encounters with nature were classified during the analysis of the excerpts. Nature encounters were most often constructed as explorative but also often as spiritual or aesthetic. Participants also discursively constructed how animals actively sought contact and ascribed a mind to nature. Further, nature encounters were discursively constructed as recreational, dangerous or recognising damage done to nature. Most nature encounters were constructed as a positive experience as well as an extraordinary aspect of nature. The results showed a variety of nature encounters. Nature was displayed as magical and perfect, aesthetic and calm, an adventurous place, as well as a predator to and a victim of humans. Some interviewees used social narratives for construction, like nature being a threat or humans damaging nature. Further research should examine the subjective reality of nature in social media postings in association with the discursive constructions of the nature encounter behind the post to learn more about the subjective reality of nature encounters.

Keywords: meaningful encounters, nature encounters, nature, animals, Discourse analysis, discursive constructions, meaning-making process

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Introduction

Spending time in nature has been an important theme in literature for a long time (Heise & Thornber, 2011). All humans are a part of nature, our physical environment works by the laws of nature, and all depend on nature's resources. However, regardless of the importance of nature for humans, everybody encounters nature differently (Schultz, 2002). Meaningful nature encounters are of great importance as these experiences form the human-nature relationship and influence the emotional attachment to nature as well as one's evaluation of nature (Kals et al., 1999; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Perkins, 2010; Whitburn et al., 2019). We communicate our perception of the world and its actors through language. Studying the verbatim of people's nature encounters reveals information about how people construct their reality and meaning-making process (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). In this study, Discourse analysis was used to study this psychological phenomenon of meaning-making. This method emerged from social constructionism, describing how knowledge is created and understood in a social context to create a subjective reality (Andrews, 2012). Discourse analysis focuses on the details in language constructing meaning, social constructs reflected in it and how the interviewee uses it to convey their reality (Georgaca & Avdi, 2011).

It is essential to define nature to study nature encounters. The term nature is context specific, subjective, and dynamic reflecting varies world views (Keune et al., 2022). In this paper, the term nature includes landscapes, ecosystems, natural processes like the weather and biodiversity, including inanimate and animate parts like plants or animals (Keune et al., 2022). Depending on their different social groups, such as their culture, norms, social narratives, as well as personal experiences, the individual's perception of nature varies (Whitburn et al., 2019).

Different narratives about nature will be presented as these can influence people's experience and interpretation of their encounters with nature. Commonly, nature is described as being a vulnerable victim of humans, as a possible threat human should not interfere with or as a harmonious provider of sublime experience (Coscieme et al., 2020; Evans, 2008; Hansen, 2006;

Olausson & Uggla, 2019; Wall, 1999). These three narratives are affected by a "master narrative" of nature, describing nature as separate from and inferior to humans, with resources free to be taken and exploited by humans (Haraway, 2016; Plumwood, 2009).

The most common narratives are focused around distancing and connecting with nature. In many common narratives, the distance between humans and nature is underlined. Historically, the cultural phenomenon of urbanisation increased the disconnection from nature (Barragan-Jason et al., 2021; Miller, 2005). This physical barrier adds to nature's devaluation and potentially legitimises destructive behaviour and norms toward nature (Barragan-Jason et al., 2021). Moreover, widely used technologies create a separation between humans and nature by avoiding direct exposure to nature (Schmuck & Schultz, 2012). Moreover, nature is often depicted as a threat to humanity, bringing uncontrollable catastrophes (Bourdeau, 2004; Cole, 2021; Hinkel et al., 2020; Stoknes, 2015). Another prominent narrative in western cultures highlights that humans are the higher beings and dominate nature. Nature can also be seen as a limitless provider of resources used to create profit and improve life, which could be called a capitalistic view (Bourdeau, 2004; Haraway, 2016; Plumwood, 2009). These narratives possibly affect the construction of nature encounters by constructing a distance between humans and nature.

Different cultures highlight the intention to protect nature. Thereby, the connection to nature. Environmental Humanities, activists and feminist movements such as "Fridays for Future" are portraying nature as a victim of humans, suffering from the western, egoistic culture that dominates nature (Bourdeau, 2004; Wallis & Loy, 2021). Here the focus lies on humans exploiting and destroying nature through their limitless consumption of natural resources and reckless pollution of nature (Haraway, 2016; Jackson, 2021; Plumwood, 2009). Discursively, this translates to the construction of nature as defenceless and suffering, humanity as destroying nature and the member of this movement as showing their intention to protect nature.

Another social narrative describes nature as a home. Humans historically hunted, lived, travelled and socialised in nature, suggesting spending the majority of time with nature (Bourdeau,

2004), matching the finding that feelings of meaningfulness and purpose are often experienced when being close to nature (Trigwell et al., 2014). Encounters with domestic nature could be perceived as spending time at home due to the emotional connection. As this construction of nature focuses on nature's function as a valuable living space and home, the intention of the beholder of this concept of nature will likely want to preserve nature (Trigwell et al., 2014). Discourses of meaningful nature encounters will likely reflect the inclusion of nature in their life. Time spent in nature is essential to understand what kind of nature encounters are perceived as meaningful.

Moreover, the meaning of nature encounters is often constructed around beauty. Admiring nature's beauty or having an aesthetic experience strengthens one's connection to nature and heightens the perceived value of nature (Barrows et al., 2022). This is also visible in media contributions about nature, for example, by portraying nature as a pure, safe, delicate and aesthetically pleasing environment. In the Disney-classic "Snow White", the princess's world is only peaceful as she flees to a sanctuary within an idyllic forest home (Whitley, 2016). Here, nature encounters would be constructed as perfect with their rich beauty and as peaceful and safe.

Furthermore, spirituality is often connected to nature and is part of nature encounters' discursive construction. Nature is also used as a source and context to experience a sense of spirituality, generating feelings of awe and transcendence, mainly found in qualitative research (Shiota et al., 2007; Trigwell et al., 2014; Williams & Harvey, 2001). This narrative is centred around feeling a "oneness" with nature, strengthening the emotional relationship with it (Toivonen & Caracciolo, 2022; Trigwell et al., 2014). Hence, one sees oneself as affecting nature, puts a greater inherent value on it and easily recognises threats to it while seeking more encounters with nature (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019). Discursively speaking, spiritual nature encounters are probably constructed as emotional and perfect.

This study will take a qualitative approach to how people discursively construct nature. Encounters with nature are constructed in a cultural context and communicated through language. Hence, Discourse analysis is the best method to analyse the construction of nature encounters, as it

takes into account the sociocultural and political context of the talk as well as the use of language and reproduction of belief systems (Lupton, 2010). Using interview transcripts as data, it is possible to get more in-depth information about their constructions of meaningful encounters. While open interview questions allow for authentic, detailed and free answers from the participant and insight into their individual perception of nature encounters (Potter, 2012). Discourse analysis is the chosen method of this study, meaning that the focus lies on how people utilise language to construct meaning while considering the sociocultural and political context and ensuring detailed results (Lupton, 2010). Moreover, Discourse analysis ensures that the sole unit of analysis is the participant's words, not adding inferences beyond what the participant said (Potter, 2012).

Studying the discursive constructions of meaningful nature encounters provides new information. This study is valuable as nature encounters shape the relationship with nature and our intention to protect it (Brügger et al., 2011). It is possible to understand how humans interact with nature and discuss or perceive experiences in nature as meaningful. This insight is valuable because it adds to the understanding of the meaning-making process and how people discuss their encounters.

So far, studies have not focussed on understanding how people discuss their meaningful encounters with nature. Past research concerning nature encounters revolved around the use of green spaces, their educational or therapeutic value and the experiences of children in nature (Ghafouri, 2012; Malone, 2016; Sandell & Öhman, 2010; Smith et al., 2022; Speake et al., 2013). Additionally, qualitative research about nature encounters has studied spiritual nature encounters while hiking, romantic experiences in nature through surfing, tourist encounters with nature or children's encounters with nature (Bratton, 2020; Canniford & Shankar, 2013; Ghafouri, 2012; Hill et al., 2013). Most research around humans and nature is quantitative and focussed on the concept of human relationship or connection to nature and its relation to protecting nature or positive affect rather than encounters with it (Bratton, 2020; Capaldi et al., 2014; Krettenauer et al., 2020; Mackay & Schmitt, 2019; Seymour, 2016; Speake et al., 2013; Whitburn et al., 2019). Quantitative research

provides information about frequencies and correlations but not about meaning-making. Thereby this research takes a new angle to qualitatively studying nature encounters with Discourse analysis.

This master thesis aims at providing an in-depth analysis of the meaning-making process of people discussing their meaningful encounters with nature. Through discourse analysis, the data will be analysed on how the participants construct meaningful encounters with nature, resulting in various constructions of meaningful nature encounters. This paper will answer the research question: *How do people discursively construct their meaningful encounters with nature?*

Methods

Design

This research has a qualitative design, aiming to investigate different discursive constructions of meaningful encounters with nature. The data are interview excerpts from 18 participants collected for Heidi Toivonen's study (Toivonen, 2022a; Toivonen, 2022b; Toivonen & Caracciolo, 2022). The interview transcripts were searched for recollections of meaningful encounters within-/animate nature, and these excerpts were then analysed using Discourse analysis. The participants' agreement to reuse the transcripts for thesis purposes was obtained, and the Ethics Committee approved this research of the University of Twente (request number: 220136).

Participants

In total, the interview transcripts of 18 participants were used, while 11 participants self-identified as women and seven self-identified as men (see Table 1). The age varies between the age of 23 to 83, and the participants have nine different nationalities. Most participants are Finish, while others are Italian, Swedish, American, Armenian, Canadian, Indonesian, Ukrainian and Dutch. Four participants work with climate change, while some are especially committed to a pro-environmental lifestyle. The participants' names were replaced with a pseudonym by the previous researcher, and these anonymised names will also be used for this study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=18), namely the Pseudonyms, Age in Years and self-ascribed Gender

	Name	Age	Gender
1.	Annie	36	Female
2.	Cat	54	Female
3.	Denise	74	Female
4.	Diana	32	Female
5.	Emma	46	Female
6.	Felicia	44	Female
7.	Fiona	39	Female
8.	Gary	46	Male
9.	Hannah	38	Female
10.	Isabella	55	Female
11.	Nicholas	43	Male
12.	Ollie	59	Male
13.	Paul	43	Male
14.	Rosa	42	Female
15.	Timothy	45	Male
16.	Uri	83	Male
17.	Yvan	43	Male
18.	Xena	23	Female

Procedure

First of all, this study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Twente (request number: 220136). The data for this research came from previous research about story talk, climate change and nonhuman agency (Toivonen, 2022a; Toivonen, 2022b; Toivonen & Caracciolo, 2022). For this study, the 21 interview transcripts with explicit consent were used in which the participant agreed to reuse their interview for research purposes. The participants of Toivonen's study were recruited through social media postings, a mailing list of environmental organisations and snowballing. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted individually after gaining the informed consent of the participants in an online videoconference via Zoom. The verbatim of the interviews conducted in Finnish was translated into English during the orthographic transcription process by Toivonen. The detailed process of conducting the interviews can be reviewed in Toivonen's paper (2022a). The previous

researcher anonymised all transcripts. The data was stored on an external drive to ensure that it would not be accessible to anyone else. The excerpts where the participants recall encounters with the in-/animate nature were selected and analysed for this research.

Materials

The original dataset of the supervising researcher consisted of 28 semi-structured interviews. For this study, 21 transcripts were used (Toivonen, 2022a; Toivonen, 2022b; Toivonen & Caracciolo, 2022). Questions of the interview concerned the participant's thoughts about the environment, nonhuman animals, climate change and thoughts about environment-related fiction that they were presented with. In this research, excerpts that concentrate on the participants' depiction of a meaningful encounter with nature and their relationship to it have been used. The analysis focuses on the parts of the interview transcripts where the participants recall encounters with nature and answer questions like "*How would you describe your relationship with the unbuilt environment or nature/animals?*". Alternatively, "*Would you like to describe a meaningful experience that you have had either with some other animal than a human or with an unbuilt environment, meaning nature?*". The excerpt was included in the analysis when an answer entailed recollecting a meaningful encounter with nature. An encounter was deemed meaningful if the participant was asked to share a meaningful encounter, described it as special, had a significant effect on the participant or chose to share an encounter with nature in detail. Beth's, Caroline's and Ollie's interviews were not considered for the final analysis because they did not entail a meaningful encounter with nature. Gloria's interview was excluded as her meaningful nature encounter was incoherent and was not focused on nature but other humans. In total, 18 interviews were included in the analysis.

Data Analysis

The relevant excerpts were read repeatedly while paying attention to the various ways participants talked about a meaningful encounter with nature when asked to do so or described as meaningful. For example, highlighting that the moment was not ordinary, remarkably beautiful, memorable or unique. The chosen method is Discourse Analysis to examine the different ways in

which reality or experiences are constructed through language. The core idea is that individuals construct meaning through language and that it reflects their sociocultural or political context (Lupton, 2010; Potter, 2012; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). The parts were read repeatedly, and attention was paid to details in language To analyse the relevant excerpts. Language offers multiple tools for meaning-making, like vocabulary, expressions, metaphors, pronouns and grammar. Here, transcripts are interpreted to identify different ways people construct meaningful nature encounters.

The unit of analysis are discursive constructions of meaningful encounters with nature, a verbal expression of a nature encounter. In the first phase of analysis, the transcripts were repeatedly scanned for discursive constructions of meaningful nature encounters, identified when the participant described experiencing a part of nature. Parts of nature included animals, plants, weather, natural phenomena and landscapes. The smallest unit of analysis that creates meaning entails at least a subject and a verb or adjective in the word group. For example:

I'm curious about animals.

This unit belonged in the "exploring encounter "category because the participant expressed her interest in animals and described how he closely observed a fox. If the unit is part of a longer sentence that contains essential aspects to add meaning to the unit, the unit of analysis includes the complete longer sentence. For example:

I just looked at a Finnish forest reindeer so into its eyes and into its beauty and into its sensitivity so it does create this mystical feeling.

This discursive position belongs in the "Spiritual encounter" category, as Denise idealises the encounter and describes her emotional experience as mystical. Most of the time, the discursive construction of a meaningful encounter is found in multiple sentences. For example:

(…) so that the joy and the peace and like the connection is so strong and a little bit like unreal. So that all of what like what you are, changes in an environment like that. One becomes silent and then a lot of this like amazement, astonishment is released. Everything is so peculiar and beautiful (…)

This discursive position of Denise belongs in the category "Spiritual encounter" because it is constructed as ideal, unreal, and emotional and significantly affects the participant. After identifying all relevant excerpts in the dataset, fitting titles describing why the encounter is meaningful were created for each discursive construction and put in a list. A table was created to create an overview during the process of analysis. One column included the excerpt, the next one the title and the last notes for analysing the meaning-making process.

If a participant used a different discursive construction in the middle of another discursive construction, they were counted as two examples of a category. The excerpt is counted as one example of a category when the interviewer was solely encouraging the participant to continue, for instance, saying "Yeah", and the participant continues using the same discursive construction.

The titles were compared, and repeating titles were grouped to create a list of categories that covered all relevant excerpts. Previous literature was reviewed to identify instances in which a patient reuses sociocultural or political discourse and further substantiate the selection of categories. The list of categories was further reviewed, and categories with a similar core idea were grouped so that no excerpt fit into multiple categories. Most participants used different discursive constructions in one verbal production of a nature encounter. This process was repeated until the final, exhaustive, mutually exclusive set of discursive construction categories was created. The analysis process was iterative to strengthen the validity of the analysis because relevant literature was reviewed repetitively, and multiple consensus meetings were held with the first supervisor. The approach to analysis, examples of interpreted excerpts and revised versions of the analysis were discussed and edited. In total, 128 extracts were categorised into eight categories of discursive constructions of meaningful nature encounters.

Results

The eight ways of constructing meaningful encounters with nature are presented in Table 2. The second column includes a short definition of each category. The last column shows the number of meaningful nature encounters in which the discursive construction was found and the participants

that used the discursive construction. The last column shows the number of discursive constructions found in the data and fitting into the category.

Discursive constructions of a meaningful nature encounter were organised into categories if they fit the category's definition for the distinction between the construction of a spiritual and beautiful nature encounter. In both, nature was constructed as perfect. To differentiate, the encounter was constructed as beautiful when the participant described their encounter as aesthetic or cute. At the same time, a spiritual construction highlights a kind of influence of the nature encounter on the participant or nature has been constructed as having some powers.

All categories of discursive constructions of meaningful nature encounters can occur in different combinations within one production of a meaningful encounter with nature. Some discursive constructions occurred more often than others. The table starts with the most used discursive construction and ends with the least used discursive construction of nature encounters.

Overall the constructed encounters can be organised into local and exotic nature encounters. Local nature encounters can be experienced in daily life. Exotic nature encounters are in a more unfamiliar environment for the interviewee, meaning on vacation or far away from their living area. When comparing the frequencies of either local or exotic nature encounters, the participants in this study constructed more local meaningful nature encounters, precisely 23. In comparison, the dataset included 14 exotic nature encounters in places far away from their residential country or on vacation.

Table 2

Overview of the categories of Discursive Constructions of Meaningful Encounters with Nature

followed by the Definition of the Discursive Construction, how often the Discourse was found in

Stories told by how many Participants and an Example Excerpt

Discursive Construction	Definition	N Encounters, (Participants)	N Discursive Constructions
1. Exploring nature	Searching for and closely observing new or special, particular natural aspects. Attempting to get to know nature, get closer as an outside observer.	17 (Cat, Annie, Emma, Paul, Rosa, Uri, Denise, Nicholas, Gary, Hannah, Timothy)	23
2. Admiring the beauty of nature	Participants construct nature as beautiful and highlight its aesthetic or cute features.	12 (Emma, Fiona, Timothy, Xena, Rosa, Paul, Denise, Nicholas, Hannah, Isabella)	18
3. Experiencing spirituality in nature	Nature is magical or perfect and has magical powers. Participants have an emotional experience, feel one with nature or are deeply connected.	9 (Denise, Nicholas, Felicia, Isabella, Hannah, Gary, Paul, Rosa, Fiona)	18
4. Recognising damage to nature	Recognise the damage or pain done to parts of nature and empathise with nature.	8 (Cat, Denise, Rosa, Diana, Emma)	16
5. Ascribing a mind to nature	Trying to understand animals or nature and ascribing human abilities or a mind to them.	9 (Isabella, Paul, Denise, Yvan, Cat, Gary, Felicia, Nicholas, Hannah, Rosa)	15
6. Being contacted by animate nature	Animals actively search for contact with humans or include humans in their world.	8 (Cat, Paul, Yvan, Cat, Felicia, Gary, Hannah, Isabella)	14
7. Relaxing in nature	Being in nature was described as peaceful and relaxing.	10 (Cat, Hannah, Fiona, Nicholas, Isabella, Rosa, Emma)	12
8. Surviving nature	Nature's power was threatening their well-being.	5 (Xena, Uri, Paul)	12

Exploring Nature

There were 23, and therefore the most discursive constructions of meaningful nature

encounters belonging to the "Exploring Nature" category. In this category, participants constructed

themselves as closely observing the in-\animate nature around them. For example, participants

mentioned multiple details, attempting to learn about nature, changes in behaviour, or trying to get

closer to animals. In the latter case, participants often used verbs like approaching. Otherwise, some participants constructed themselves as knowledgeable by listing past times they observed nature and the knowledge they gathered about that part of nature. Often the aspects of nature they explored were new to them or noteworthy in another way, like encountering them seldomly. Adjectives like rare, uncommon or unusual were used to underline this as well as establish contrast by describing what nature usually looks like. The role of the explorer also comes with the interviewee constructing themselves as outside observers, meaning that they do not construct interaction with the part of nature. One example of an explorative nature encounter is Cat observing the local birds.

> *Surely just now that it's perhaps impossible to think back fifty years so these birds here in our countryside terrace. A feeding station for winter birds and well… willow tits. It is my favourite bird and a rattan swing there next to it… Following them, how they act, how they act in relation to each other, how they frolic.*

Interestingly, Cat constructs herself as someone experienced by mentioning an encounter 50 years back while also underlining the meaningfulness of this nature encounter as she remembers this encounter regardless. She describes the setting of the encounter, her home, as close to nature, describing herself as spending much time with nature. In the following sentence, Cat describes herself as knowledgeable about nature, as she names a specific bird group and later a specific bird species. This discursive construction continues as she calls willow tits her favourite birds, indirectly indicating her knowledge of birds as she can distinguish birds. Moreover, she is constructing her encounter as explorative by describing herself as paying attention to details, trying to learn more about them and actively seeking contact with the birds. As Cat used the verb "following" to describe her actions, she said that the birds lead, which supports the construction of Cat as the observer. Therefore, Cat constructs her meaningful encounter with the birds as explorative while constructing herself as an experienced nature explorer.

Admiring the Beauty of Nature

In 10 interviews, meaningful encounters were discursively constructed as "Admiring the Beauty of Nature" 18 times. Most discursive constructions included the verb "admiring", which indicates a feeling of being in awe, and multiple adjectives to describe how aesthetic the in-/animate nature is, for example, beautiful, impressive, wow-experience or magnificent. The word beautiful was also used to explain how big or powerful nature is. Animate nature was also often described as cute, which was often followed by mentioning aesthetic aspects of their appearance.

Emma recalls a change in her perception of the Finnish landscapes after living abroad.

(…) now one can look at things a little bit with an outsider's eyes in a way, so... It is so magnificent and like... Just this... random path in the forest near to your house has also become like a wow experience. Perhaps it is part of this modern fuss about experience where everything must be an experience so that one can then put pictures on social media to show how nice it was somewhere in the nature. ((chuckles)) So that it is a little bit like... I confess that I have myself taken this urban direction in this sense.

Emma appreciated the beauty of the Finnish forests and lakes. Her appreciation for the beauty of Finnish nature grew as she moved away. Therefore, Emma suggests that one learns to admire local beauty by taking on a non-local perspective. Emma called the forest "magnificent" and a "wow experience, " describing Finnish nature as perfect and beautiful. Simultaneously, she criticised her modern habit of posting pictures of nature experiences on social media. She "confessed" to participating in this "modern fuss" and "urban direction", describing it as undesirable. It is important to consider that Emma differentiates herself from the mass, being modern or urban in an interview. Meaning that she is concerned with appearing positively to the interviewer. The habit Emma describes is similar to the recent social phenomenon of sharing "instagrammable" nature experiences on social media and the need to show how beautiful one's life is (Arts et al., 2021). The study of Arts et al. also mentions that the habit of sharing special or beautiful nature moments can lead to sharing homogenous visual representations of nature and can consequently appear

unauthentic (2021). Emma's description is similar, and she recognised the pressure to post beautiful photos as she stated that pictures "must" be "nice" or an experience.

While the word "Wonder" is also used to describe the uniqueness and beauty of a natural phenomenon in "Rosa´s" nature encounter with her children. This excerpt is unique as Rosa is taking over the role of the teacher for her children, to whom she shows the beauty of the night sky.

> *My kids were finally old enough to stay up in the summertime when it's like warm enough to be outside at night and they could stay up late enough that it was dark enough to really really see the stars. And it was their first time seeing the Milky Way, their first time seeing shooting stars, and they just... you know, my daughter who's twelve told me, she's like- this is the coolest thing I have ever seen in my life.*

Rosa described this experience as special and herself as anticipating by using the word "finally". While she also described herself as a caring mother because she made an effort to create the perfect experience for her children. She mentioned all the circumstances that made this experience perfect and painted an aesthetic image of watching stars. She highlighted this encounter's uniqueness by mentioning that her kids watch the stars for the first time. Her daughter's experience was described as admiring the milky way, again highlighting the beauty of the stars. Past research explored nature as an additional partner in the parent-child relationship and found that parents significantly influence their child´s engagement with nature (O'Rourke, o. D.). Similar to O'Rourke's research, Rosa shared a positive experience in nature with her child and taught that nature is beautiful, wonderous and positive (o.D.). *"You see this, this sort of- the wonder in a child at how big the universe is around her. It was just a really beautiful moment."*. Rosa continued constructing the encounter as special, calling it a "wonder" and magical from the child's perspective. At the same time, Rosa painted the image of a child surrounded by the universe, which illustrated beauty and meaningfulness as the biggest natural phenomenon.

Experiencing Spirituality in Nature

A meaningful encounter with nature was discursively constructed as "Experiencing Spirituality in Nature" 18 times. Participants often used adjectives like magical, mystical, and fantastic or described being one with nature or feeling connected to it. Additionally, nature was often constructed as powerful or "god-like" by significantly affecting them, for example, being able to change perspectives. Encounter with nature or nature were often constructed as perfect by naming desirable aspects. Participants often described their experiences as emotional.

This is apparent in the nature encounter of "Denise". She described nature as distinct from humans and as if humans would exist differently without nature, referring to an often-used construction of the separated human-nature relationship (Barragan-Jason et al., 2021).

There one experiences like a completely different side of your existence [olemuspuoli] the joy and the peace and like the connection is so strong and a little bit like unreal. So that all of what you are, changes in an environment like that. One becomes silent and then a lot of this like amazement, astonishment is released. Everything is so peculiar and beautiful (…) walking and all things like that and then one wants to move in a completely different manner, so that like… one goes to pet the trees and wants to sit on a stone and ((chuckles)) and just be there, and that is like such a such a, a little bit like one would be in a cradle, safe.

Here the participant described a strong connection she felt during her meaningful encounter. The adjective ´unreal´ also described nature as a magical, outside reality. Denise assigned nature the power to change "all of what you are". This effect and experience were described as generalisable using pronouns like "one". Amazement and astonishment are big emotions that usually mark something special and powerful, in this case, the nature encounter. Denise idealised nature, implying that all in nature is beautiful and positive. Being compelled to move differently and pet trees like worship described nature as god-like. The idealised and motherly image of nature as a guardian is also supported by nature, making her feel "safe" (Liu et al., 2019).

In another excerpt, "Felicia´s" meaningful encounter with nature was watching falling stars.

I put a lot of meaning into the falling stars. It's kind of a sign… Also kind of thing, it's not actually, it doesn't mean anything, because for example in the South we see like every night, every other night it's possible to see falling stars, but you know, I put a lot of meanings, "Okay, it's good luck!".

Felicia approached the question differently. When asked about a meaningful encounter with nature, she started with what natural phenomenon has meaning to her. Interestingly, Felicia was reluctant to present herself as believing in signs. As this is an interview situation, Felicia may have wanted to present herself positively. Possibly, she wanted to present herself as logical to be socially desirable. Then she used the common conception that something that happens frequently cannot be special or meaningful. Finally, Felicia returned to her initial construction, saying it symbolises luck. She connected this natural phenomenon with a positive outcome and, therefore, as meaningful.

Recognising Damage to Nature

Nature encounters were described as "Recognising Damage to Nature" 13 times. Participants recognised or witnessed animals or nature in pain or damage. Participants recognised that nature was mistreated, physically hurt or falling apart by human action. In all cases, the participants empathised with nature as they reported feeling their pain. Some interviewees directly mentioned adjectives constructing their feelings about recognising the damage, like painful or wrenching and added adverbs like "very". Some participants also learned a lesson from witnessing the damage to nature and developed empathy for nature, which constructed their encounter as meaningful to them as they reflected on what they saw and stated that they want to prevent the damage to nature.

Rosa told two stories in which she recognised the pain in animals. She visited the zoo with her children. "*Something about that day at the zoo... was just sort of profoundly... altering. The elephant was alone in its enclosure and I know elephants to be deeply social animals and it just felt wrong.*". Rosa described a new insight that changes her attitude towards zoos by saying the experience was "profoundly altering". Also, the word enclosure painted the picture that it is limited

and imprisoned. What she witnessed did not match her morals, and the circumstances of the zoo do not seem to match up with her knowledge of elephant needs.

Seeing the elephant also impacted the sight of all the other zoo animals. "*every animal we saw after that elephant at the zoo that day just sort of broke my heart in a way that I'd never expected before, so I won't go to the zoos, I won't support them. (…)*" In this excerpt, Rosa described her adverse emotional reaction to seeing the elephants by using the metaphor of a broken heart. The ethical implication seemed so big that she wanted to take action and decided not to support zoos anymore. The intention to help after witnessing pain is known as feeling empathy. Rosa described animals as able to feel pain and herself as an empathetic and animal rights advocate (Young et al., 2018). Wanting to take action to prevent the pain of zoo animals matches the activist discourse of nature encounters (Bourdeau, 2004; Wallis & Loy, 2021). She later called the zoo animals living space a cage made by humans and animals as victims to humans. "*So I think I've developed kind of more of a compassion for wild animals and you know, you know, seeing the caging of them by humans is deeply unfair.*". Further, she highlighted how immoral zoos are and how she gained compassion for animals as a consequence, describing herself as having gone through personal development.

Rosa later described how a neighbour took baby bunnies away from their mother and they died as a consequence. She described the lesson she learned from this experience. "*It has always stuck with me as an example of how we need to control our own impulses when it comes to animals, because the way that they live and their needs are not fully known to.*" She described that recognising the pain humans inflict on animals shaped her morals. Rosa described this memory's significant impact as "stuck" with her. Next, Rosa wanted to get across what she learned and expressed that everyone, "we", should adhere. She learned that only thinking about one´s desires could produce suffering. By using the word "impulses", Rosa described human nature as harmful, holding every human responsible as she uses two possessive pronouns, "our" and "own". This has similarities with the activist discourse of human predators egoistically harming and dominating animals (Bourdeau,

2004; Wallis & Loy, 2021). Lastly, Rosa described humans as unable to anticipate if they respect animals´ needs and that humans should not believe they could consider animal needs.

Ascribing a mind to nature

In 11 interviews, the discursive construction of "Ascribing a Mind to Nature" appeared 17 times. Often participants described how they tried to understand what the animal wanted from them, how it felt in the moment or how the animal perceived the participants. While doing so, they ascribed cognitive or even psychological functions to them, the ability to communicate with humans and recognise typically human feelings in animals. In some cases, the participants also debated whether animals possess human traits, like humour. Sometimes participants suggested that the animal is better at a particular skill than themselves.

Felicia´s meaningful encounter occurred right at the moment of the interview as she noticed a lizard. Her construction of the meaningful encounter shows her thinking process during the encounter in which she tried to understand the lizard. She anthropomorphised the lizard by ascribing complex human abilities like language or gender. The lizard was described as an individual, as she uses a pronoun for that specific lizard.

> *Oh, and there is a lizard just right side of me, just listening. I don't know if she understood it. I don't know if it is "it", because I don't know if it's he or she, but anyway, I don't know if it understands English, but it's listening ((the interviewer chuckles)) this. They are funny here. It actually it acknowledges my presence, it's looking on me, but it doesn't do anything because in some way I'm also moving and everything. It's not afraid.*

In this excerpt, Felicia anthropomorphised the lizard in multiple instances. Felicia used her knowledge about lizards and humans to make assumptions about the lizard´s perceptions. For instance, she reasoned that the lizard could listen, pay attention and interact with Felicia as it was not moving and looked at her. Interestingly, Felicia was cautious with interpreting the lizard, as she acknowledged that she could not be sure and described herself as considerate to the lizard. According to her, the lizard could sense that Felicia was not a danger to it, describing her as an

animal friend. Similar to the findings of Kupsala et al., being concerned with animal welfare was connected to ascribing a mind to an animal (2016).

Being Contacted by Animate Nature

The discursive construction of "Being Contacted by Animate Nature" appeared 14 times. This category entailed constructions of nature encounters with animals actively or purposefully seeking contact with humans and sometimes including humans in their world. In some discursive constructions, the prospective animal was not escaping and staying close to the interviewee against their expectation. One example of this is Hannah´s meaningful encounter.

> *Yeah, and then well in Indonesia you know we have a lot of coral reefs and reef species so the co- if- when I went for like snorkelling, actually, the fish were fine, they were really not escaping. They were just swimming around. So... again that is an encounter that I feel like they just think we're part of them. Just like part of the background of their backyard.*

Hannah illustrates how it was special that the fish were not escaping but staying close to her. Followed by saying, "they were really not escaping" as if she wanted to emphasise to the interviewer that she told the truth. Hannah generalised that fish think "we´re" part of them, describing humans as part of the fish´s living space. Therefore, Hannah pointed out that the fish did not see humans as completely different beings but rather as another animal belonging to their home. This discursive construction of Hannah being part of the fish´s world is similar to the discursive construction of feeling one with nature and spiritual encounters. However, it differs in the sense that Hannah did not see herself as part of the fish but instead assumed that the fish saw her as a part of them.

In the following, "Paul" described an encounter with a moose while he hiked in the woods. He described a moose seeking contact with a group of hikers.

> *(...) all of a sudden became aware of a young moose following us. It was like right there very close. And the fact that there somehow this kind of realisation that a moose can be so curious and like in this way, somehow join our company. (…) a very great feeling about how we formed this like deep connection that we were orienting together with a moose.*

Paul created the impression that the moose noticed the group and copied their path to stay close to them. Paul repeatedly described the moose as closely following them as out of the ordinary, indicating that this is new to him. By describing the moose as curious, able to join their company and orienting together, he again described the moose as actively seeking contact and wanting to learn more about the human group.

Relaxing in Nature

Nature encounters were also constructed as "Relaxing in nature" 12 times in 10 interviews. The interviewee used adjectives like relaxing, peaceful or variations of silence to describe the recreational effect of nature. Furthermore, participants contrast their stress before the nature encounter and their relief of stress through their peaceful state after the nature encounter.

For instance, "Hannah" constructed the recreational effect of nature encounters. *"The daily encounter is already a lot, like when I feel like I'm crazy in my mind like my head is full, I can go walk."*. Here Hannah started by emphasising that the daily nature encounters have a great calming affect. Next, she described her walks as a habit by saying she is daily in nature. Next, she described her negative mental state, "crazy" and "full", that she resolved by going for a walk.

Furthermore, the interviewees directly described using nature encounters as a coping strategy when stressed. "Fiona" described that the pandemic gave her the chance to focus on something other than working and performing duties, so she went walking in a forest.

(…) in the middle of all this performing of duties when you all the time just look ahead or directly 45 degrees down when you walk out there on a street and you do things all the time, and then there I looked above. And then all of a sudden it felt like everything was crashing and it was like "Oh yeah, is this what you need now?".

In this part, Fiona described her inner experience in detail. She established a clear contrast between her being in nature and her performing duties or being in her "doing mode". The term "doing mode" is a concept of Mindfulness, which describes a mental state of not being aware of your current emotions or needs (Bohlmeijer & Hulsbergen, 2018). To illustrate the opposing state, she

used the metaphor of her view direction. When she looked up, her ´doing mode´ was interrupted,
and her perspective changed completely. The metaphor of crashing created the visual that looking up
disrupts the pile of duties and made her needs visible. Becoming aware of needs was possible when
being in the moment, which shares similarities with Mindfulness (Bohlmeijer & Hulsbergen, 2018).
Fiona continued describing how the forest has a positive effect on her.

> *Sometimes one must look up, and there one saw all those colourful trees. I can send you the*
> *picture if you want of that moment because it is somehow so like... All those trees there*
> *around me, the colours, the sun was shining and it was like, it was like, it made me feel like*
> *"nature around me is more important", import- very important and like it gives you a lot of*
> *strength and it gives you peace of mind and gives you like the space to breathe and like to be*
> *for one moment present with oneself.*

Fiona started with general advice for everybody to look up by using the pronoun "one" while
clarifying that this is a "must". Then, she used the verb "give" twice, constructing nature as a giving
agent. Fiona listed multiple positive mental states, describing the forest as a valuable resource for
mental well-being. This construction shows similarities with the notion of nature being healthy for
the mind, explicitly relieving stress or promoting calmness (Zamora et al., 2021). Again, Fiona
constructed her experience as generalisable, for instance, by using the pronoun "oneself".

Surviving Nature

In 12 instances, nature encounters were discursively constructed as "Surviving Nature". In
two, the participant showed that a human does not have a chance against the power of nature.
Participants often described there was a real possibility of getting harmed or killed by nature and
they were lucky to survive. Unpredictability and feeling powerless were constructed by describing
the big power difference between the participant and the natural force or by stating that they felt
small or weak. Participants highlighted the danger through adjectives like disastrous, scary, and
dangerous or adjectives like big to underline nature's power. Sometimes participants explained what
they learned from surviving. "Uri", for instance, shows that he learned something by mentioning the

exact signs of danger. Uri tells two stories in which he was close to losing his life because a natural force was too strong to control. *"We were often in situations where things could've been turned, become disastrous."* Uri created a sense of the unpredictability of nature encounters illustrating that sailing can get dangerous at any time. In the following excerpt, Uri described the end of the danger.

> *But again, in this very ((roarly?)) kind of long big big waves in any case, it was a situation. It was a learning experience, first of all, for us, and… But, again, it indicated to me how very lucky we are, not only in even being able to go or able to go out and sail and do the kind of have the kind of experience that we did have in terms of lifestyle, but to survive in it. We were- we had we had a lot of luck in our in our travel around the world. And… so, that was kind of just it, yeah. It was just a dangerous kind of situation that- event, related to the ocean.*

Uri highlighted the danger by repeating adjectives emphasising the power of nature, the "big big waves". Next, Uri described that he learned from the experience, listing factors making the trip dangerous. Interestingly, Uri still called himself lucky for the trip and for surviving it, describing these as a coincidence and himself as grateful for his privilege of travelling and life. Ending on survival also highlighted the finitude of death and the seriousness of the danger. While "surviving in it" painted the picture of Uri surrounded by the waves and completely exposed to their power, again suggesting the inability to control the situation. This reflects the narrative of nature being uncontrollable, dangerous and a threat to human well-being while humans are inferior to the power of nature (Bourdeau, 2004; Cole, 2021; Hinkel et al., 2020; Mackay & Schmitt, 2019; Stoknes, 2015).

Discussion

This research aimed to explore how the participants discursively constructed their meaningful encounters with nature. The research question was answered by analysing interview excerpts with Discourse analysis. The results showed that meaningful nature encounters were most frequently constructed as exploratory, spiritual or beautiful. Moreover, the analysis of the meaning-making process revealed that most meaningful encounters included a positive construction of the experience as well as an extraordinary aspect of nature.

Key Findings

Through analysis, eight categories of discursive constructions of meaningful nature encounters were identified in the 18 interviews. Nature encounters were most frequently constructed as exploring parts of nature. This category entails constructions in which the interviewee observed details of nature, trying to get closer and observe a rare, special or new aspect of nature. Sometimes interviewees also constructed their explorative encounters by highlighting that they searched for something and purposefully paid much attention to their surroundings. Next, interviewees discursively constructed their encounters 18 times as spiritual and 18 times as beautiful. The construction of experiencing spirituality in nature often included descriptions of feeling one with and idealising nature as well as describing it as magical or mystical. Similarly, constructions of the category of admiring the beauty of nature were also idealised as a solely positive nature. In contrast to the spiritual encounters, beautiful encounters were constructed surrounding their aesthetic or ´cute´ features, describing their visual properties in detail and often describing their role in the experience as ´admiring´. Moreover, meaningful nature encounters were discursively constructed as recognising damage to, ascribing a mind to, relaxing in and surviving in nature. The participants' constructions of nature encounters were expected to reflect social narratives. Past research and this study underlined common narratives like nature as a threat to or a victim to humans and a spiritual or beautiful place (Bourdeau, 2004; Cole, 2021; Hinkel et al., 2020; Shiota et al., 2007; Stoknes, 2015; Trigwell et al., 2014; Wallis & Loy, 2021).

Connecting Results

Comparing the frequencies of interviewees constructing the living or inanimate nature as meaningful encounters with animals were slightly more often produced, with a total of 19, compared to encounters with inanimate nature with 17. This does show that experiences with the inanimate and animate nature are similarly often constructed as meaningful and suggests that the participants think about landscapes as much as animals as part of nature.

The different discursive constructions were linked. When a participant constructed their encounter as being contacted by animate nature, most participants also used discursive constructions of ascribing a mind to nature. This makes sense, considering that interaction is reciprocal between two beings. To react to the communication of one part, the other part usually interprets it and thereby ascribes mental ability to them (Hornbæk & Oulasvirta, 2017).

Another pair of discursive constructions was repeatedly used together, namely the spiritual and beautiful construction of nature encounters. Both produced a strong desirable emotional reaction for the interviewee, like joy, hope, peace or chills. In addition, beautiful and spiritual nature encounters were often conceptualised by solely positive and desirable aspects or directly labelled as perfect, unreal or fantastic. Thereby, sharing the aspect of idealising nature, a trend to idealise nature was also identified in research (Prévot-Julliard et al., 2011). The tendency to idealise nature reflects a common construction of fairytale-like nature encounters similar to how Disney portrays nature as only being peaceful and a sanctuary to the protagonist (Whitley, 2016). Further, a widely adapted habit idealises nature, namely the perfectionism of nature pictures for social media in which only perfectly aesthetic or extraordinary visual representations of nature are deemed fit to share with others (Prévot-Julliard et al., 2011).

It was also interesting that the contrasting narratives of nature as a victim versus a perpetrator were used in different interviews. It was unique that nature encounters constructed as dangerous were usually not paired with another discursive category other than exploring nature. Therefore, dangerous encounters were solely constructed as negative. Additionally, nature was constructed as being very powerful and uncontrollable. In contrast, humans were constructed as weak, unable to fight nature and only surviving with luck (Bourdeau, 2004; Cole, 2021; Hinkel et al., 2020; Stoknes, 2015). Which gives reason to assume that having to fear for one´s well-being or life made the encounter meaningful.

Comparison to Previous Research

The narrative of nature as a victim to humans was used in discursive constructions of nature encounters as witnessing nature's pain and damage inflicted by humans. Matching past research about the narrative of nature being destroyed by egoistic humans who dominate nature and put their needs above nature's well-being (Bourdeau, 2004; Wallis & Loy, 2021). When participants constructed nature as suffering from humans, they empathised with the animal in pain and often developed the intention to protect nature. Matching past research found that nature encounters positively correlate with environmentally protective behaviour or a protective intention (Brügger et al., 2011). This also conforms with past research about an activist mindset centred around the intention to protect nature and foster environmentally friendly actions in others like Rosa, who is a role model for her children and boycotting zoos (Brügger et al., 2011; Wallis & Loy, 2021). Participants first recognised the pain in animals, felt bad for it and adopted the intention to prevent animal pain, reflecting their psychological ability compassion (Gilbert et al., 2017; Gorski et al., 2018).

Furthermore, participants described more local than exotic locations of their encounters. Previous research suggested that mass-media contributions about nature focus on extraordinary places leading to an idealisation of nature. This promotes the idea in people that nature can only be experienced in specific places that are different and away from their nearby environment (Prévot-Julliard et al., 2011). The findings of this study do match the assumption that some people tend to have an idealised idea of nature, such as Isabella´s encounter with dolphins. While the findings do not confirm that people would mostly name exotic places as meaningful nature encounters, most encounters were situated in the nearby environment of participants. Besides, participants primarily described extraordinary parts of nature in local places, which still emphasises that meaningful nature encounters still included something that is not seen commonly, like seeing a fox.

Strengths & Limitations

This study offers multiple strengths. For one, this study provides detailed insights into the meaning-making process. The results show mostly positive nature encounters as exploring a special

aspect of nature. Additionally, the findings demonstrated the variability of discursive constructions of nature encounters. This study adds insights into how the meaningfulness of nature encounters was conveyed (Lupton, 2010; Potter, 2012). This is important as humans use language and draw from social narratives to communicate their reality, their perspective of the world, and themselves (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). This study has a highly detailed analysis, allowing for deep insights into the constructions of meaningful encounters with nature. The method of discourse analysis also has the strength that it takes the sociocultural and political context of the participant into account (Lupton, 2010). Additionally, the sample offers diversity in nationality, which shows that people from different nationalities can use similar discursive constructions of nature encounters.

There are also limitations to this study. In Discourse analysis, using verbal interactions in a daily context without a researcher being a part of it can be advantageous. The interview design has the limitation that the participants potentially talk differently when answering researchers. It could be insightful to use transcripts of descriptions of nature encounters produced in a daily free time setting, for example, those shared in a social media posting. Another limitation is the sample size. This qualitative method is extensive and only allows for a small sample size. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Therefore this research should be repeated to see if a larger number of people in other contexts used similar discursive constructions of meaningful nature encounters.

Recommendations & Practical implications

Most nature encounters were about an extraordinary sight in their local area, like seeing a rare bird in their local lake like Annie. Further, participants described many exotic parts of nature, swimming with dolphins or the silent desert. Creating the impression that many participants thought about extraordinary or exotic aspects of nature when asked to describe a meaningful encounter. The culture on social media may have resulted in a new norm of sharing ideal and extraordinary nature experiences to appear desirable (Arts et al., 2021). Mixed methodological research could investigate the association between how participants present nature in their social media postings and how meaningful the experience of the post was to them. When a participant only posts about exotic

vacation destinations, it could be expected that they find these more meaningful than local nature encounters. That way, researchers could gain more profound knowledge of the participants' subjective reality as social media is used to present our reality to others.

In practice, the insights of this research are valuable as they could inform the development of interventions to promote human engagement with and interest in nature. Based on this research, one can make inferences about the kind of nature experiences people want to experience or what people find enjoyable about nature. Promoting human engagement with nature is essential, as spending time in nature strengthens one´s connection to nature, promoting environmentally protective behaviour (Brügger et al., 2011; Whitburn et al., 2019). In practice, the findings of this research would support the development of interventions that offer the possibility to explore nature. More local and ordinary aspects of nature could also be presented as more desirable by teaching people the more extraordinary facts surrounding those aspects. A social media account could be developed with a nature expert that allows a wide range of viewers to observe local nature closely and learn what makes them unique.

This study provided the insight that participants find it meaningful to experience peace in nature and that some purposefully search for nature encounters to experience peace by being present. This is similar to the current development in psychology, as positive psychology and Mindfulness are growing in application and relevance (Bohlmeijer & Hulsbergen, 2018; Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2021). Knowing the aspects of meaningful nature encounters, interventions promoting meaningfulness and creating feelings of peace could adopt these aspects. For instance, Fiona explained in great detail that walking in a forest made her mindful of what she needed as she looked up. Denise described herself as intending to sense the forest by touching trees and sitting in silence, which she describes as peaceful. The aspects that produced the positive feelings and a state of Mindfulness could be translated into instructions for exercises to promote them. While in an aesthetic natural environment like a forest, people could try to find as many aspects of nature around them as they find interesting and beautiful. This would introduce them to being in the

present moment while promoting a positive focus (Bohlmeijer & Hulsbergen, 2018). Further,

Psychologists could test the effectiveness of the exercises and design an audioguide so that people

could follow the exercise on their own.

Conclusion

This paper provides empirical findings about the various ways people discursively construct

meaningful encounters with nature through Discursive analysis. This study shows eight different

discursive constructions of nature encounters, while the most used was the exploratory construction

of an encounter with a special aspect of nature. Overall, most meaningful nature encounters were

constructed as positive. They contributed detailed insights to grow the understanding of the human

meaning-making process concerning encounters with nature which were lacking in prior research.

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