



A conceptual framework of hope in response to radical uncertainty in transitions

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops an innovative conceptual framework of hope for embracing radical uncertainty in transitions. Literature on narratives of hope has not fully operationalized the concept of hope, which is needed to provide scholars with a better understanding of what embracing radical uncertainty through hope exactly means. To fill this research gap, this paper explores and unpacks the work on hope of public theologian Jonathan Sacks. Sacks understands hope as a journey in which actors gradually learn how to collectively take responsibility for improving their shared living conditions. The paper uses a transversal reasoning approach in which scholars from diverse disciplines jointly and critically unpack Sacks' understanding of hope. This understanding is based on three key elements of a hopeful response to radical uncertainty: (1) change of identity, (2) active empathy and (3) relational knowledge. Furthermore, Sacks highlights the importance of two institutions to support these elements: (1) covenant and (2) public Sabbath. This conceptual framework of hope is applied to a infrastructure megaproject, which is confronted with radical uncertainty. The findings contribute to transition studies by offering a novel conceptual framework of hope for embracing radical uncertainty. Furthermore, the framework contributes to the theoretical development and practical application of the concept of hope.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on embracing radical uncertainty, which results from events we can't predict (King & Kay, 2020), and which is inherent to what Hannah Arendt calls 'the human condition of existence' (2019 [1958]: 5). Recently, literature has emerged seeking to incorporate radical uncertainty in new ways (King & Kay, 2020; Scoones, 2024). For example, King and Kay (2020) recall that narrative reasoning is a strong way to cope with radical uncertainty, as it has been around for thousands of years: "for too long, the type of intelligence that is necessary to cope with a world of radical uncertainty has been underestimated and undernourished" (2020: 176). Oxley (2020) indicates that there are two types of narratives to interpret radical uncertainty and shape actor's imaginative worlds and practices, namely an apocalyptic story and one of hope. The apocalyptic narratives are widespread, especially with regard to

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environmental issues (Bruckner, 2013). Hopeful narratives are less frequently highlighted.

The ability to imagine, develop and narrate more sustainable futures has only recently begun to receive attention in environmental studies (Hebinck et al., 2022; Hoffman et al., 2024; Røkenes et al., 2025). Hebinck et al. (2022) capture the patterns and repertoires of building-up, breakdown, and their interactions in sustainable transitions, while Hoffman et al. (2024) use utopian repertoire in state-society interactions to engage citizens and to mobilize alternative futures. In another example, Snyder (2000) connects hope to action components through three different aspects: (1) a positive future goal, (2) pathway thinking, and (3) agency thinking. Except for Ojala (2017) who shows hope is a multifaceted concept consisting of emotional, cognitive, and action components, literature on narratives of hope has not yet fully operationalized the concept of hope. This operationalization is needed to understand how hope shapes the embracing of radical uncertainty (King & Kay, 2020; Oxley, 2020; Scoones, 2024).

This paper aims to provide a novel conceptual framework of hope based on narrative reasoning to embrace radical uncertainty. We do so by using the work of Jonathan Sacks, who wrote extensively on hope (Harris et al., 2012; Hasselaar, 2020). Sacks can be regarded as a public theologian with a particular concern for issues in the public sphere (Harris et al., 2012). Public theology can be seen as the study of the impact of theology on the daily lives of actors in society (Kim, 2013). In Sacks' understanding, hope is already there, but to claim its potential, actors are invited to learn gradually that there is something new and liberating possible in the midst of radical uncertainty. In other words, hope is expressed as a journey in which actors gradually learn how to take responsibility for creating a better future (Sacks, 2011). Such an approach relates to what O'Brien (2013; 307) has called "an inside-out approach" to transition, arguing that in order to change the future we need to examine "the individual and collective values, beliefs and worldviews that support the behaviors, institutions, and systems that create and perpetuate the problems to which we have to adapt". In sum, Sacks' writings can be input for a conceptual framework of hope in embracing radical uncertainty in transitions.

Based upon the discussion above, the central research question in this paper is; *how does the work of Sacks informs a conceptual framework of hope in embracing radical uncertainty?* To answer this question a research team consisting of seven scholars with disciplinary backgrounds in theology, economics, psychology, organization science, engineering and anthropology, jointly engaged with Sacks' understanding of hope through transversal reasoning (TR), which is a shared and critical reflection of diverse scholars working together on a shared problem (Van Huyssteen, 1999). This resulted in a conceptual framework based on Sacks' five key elements of hope. To show the relevance of this framework we focus on the transformation of the Dutch infrastructure sector, which faces radical uncertainty caused by, among other things, energy transition, climate change, and degradation of biodiversity and we apply the framework to the case of the A16 Rotterdam infrastructure megaproject.

This article is structured as follows. The next section explores the notion of radical uncertainty. In Section 3 the method of TR and the case study have been explained. Section 4 works out the concept of hope in the work of Jonathan Sacks is examined more closely, with subsections devoted to key elements of Sacks' concept of hope as part of a TR: (4.1) change of identity, (4.2) *chesed* (a special kind of empathy) and (4.3) *emunah* (a special kind of trust) and related institutions of (4.4) covenant and (4.5) public Sabbath. Section 5 focuses on the transition of the Dutch infrastructure sector and the example of the A16 Rotterdam megaproject. In the discussion section the contribution of the key elements of hope to the academic debates are discussed. Finally, in the concluding section limitations of this research and outlines future research opportunities are presented.

2. Transitions and radical uncertainty

Persisting issues like climate change, loss of biodiversity, resource depletion and widening social inequality have spurred interest in sustainable transition research. Sustainability transitions are "long-term, multi-dimensional, and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption" (Markard et al., 2012: 956). Köhler et al. (2019) argue that although the scope of transitions research has broadened and connections to established disciplines have grown stronger, the persisting issues related to sustainability remain unsolved. Uncertainty is one of the key elements of these persisting issues (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016; Grunwald, 2007; Markard et al., 2012). During transitions actors are in a constant process of sense-making and organizing (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Scoones (2024) argues that for a long time actors predominantly treated all kinds of uncertainties as if they were calculable risks. However, uncertainty is an unexpected situation, regardless of whether it could have been possible to consider it in advance (Perminova et al., 2008). For example, the financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid 19 crisis showed uncertainty cannot be reduced to calculable risks and should be understood as a fundamental condition for management and governance (e.g. Hoffman et al., 2024; Scoones, 2024; Van Dorsser et al., 2020). Therefore, Scoones argues that new approaches urgently need to be developed that help to embrace radical uncertainties. "Uncertainties face us all and are not going away, yet conventional, mainstream institutions and policies are ill-equipped to respond" (Scoones, 2024: 167).

Based upon a literature review, Bevan (2022) analyses diverse scales of uncertainty used in literature and concludes that the fragmentation in the discussion on uncertainty prevents a clear definition of what radical or deep uncertainty exactly is. We follow the definition of radical uncertainty by Kay and King (2020). In *The End of Alchemy* (King, 2017) and *Radical Uncertainty* (King & Kay, 2020) the scholars argued that we not only live in a world of risk, but also in a world of radical uncertainty. King and Kay (2020) make a distinction between resolvable and radical uncertainty. Resolvable uncertainty concerns conditions in which unknowns can be clarified through information retrieval or formally specified using known probability distributions. However, with radical uncertainty, "there is no similar means of resolving the uncertainty – we simply don't know" (King & Kay, 2020: 14). Other scholars too have recently highlighted radical uncertainty using terms like 'deep uncertainty', 'level 4 uncertainties', 'ambiguity', 'fundamental uncertainty' and 'uncertainty in a wide sense' (Roos, 2015; Scoones, 2024; Van Dorsser et al., 2020). Uncertainties, an inherent characteristic of infrastructure projects (Dewulf & Garvin, 2020; Perminova et al., 2008), are in the infrastructure sector dominantly

addressed by what Van Dorsser et al. (2020) call Level 2 or 3 uncertainties. These are uncertainties that can be mitigated by risk management (Yu et al., 2018) or by making a financial reservation in the budget.

However, the transition towards a sustainable sector is an inherently uncertain process, labeled Level 4 by Van Dorsser et al. (2020). Flyvbjerg (2021) acknowledge the weakness of traditional risk management in the infrastructure sector when coping with radical uncertainty and suggests to work with a set of reference infrastructure projects in order to forecast risks. Van Dorsser et al. (2020) suggest adaptiveness and allowing learning to take place as conditions change. Transition is thus a multi-authored process in which different types of actors will have different perceptions of radical uncertainties (Meijer & Hekkert, 2007). In a world of radical uncertainty, “knowledge of the underlying process is imperfect, the processes themselves are constantly changing, and the ways in which they operate depend not just on what people do, but on what people think” (King & Kay, 2020: 44). In such a world, our understanding of the present is imperfect, while our understanding of the future is even more limited.

3. Method section

Interdisciplinarity is needed to better understand hope as an adaptive response to radical uncertainty in the infrastructure sector, yet it is not self-evident (Reeves, 2018). Van Huyssteen (1999) developed an interdisciplinary approach, in which transversal reasoning (TR) is central. Transversal reasoning can be understood as a process in which participants recognize multiple perspectives or rationalities and engage in a dialogue across these differences. Participants compare their viewpoints, identify partial connections without forcing consensus, in order to develop context-sensitive judgments (Van Huyssteen, 1999).

TR involves shared and critical reflection among participants working together on a shared problem (Hasselaar, 2023), which in our case concerns responding to radical uncertainty in the Dutch infrastructure sector. Our research team consisted of seven scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds. We organized the process of TR in four steps.

In the first step, the scholars involved acknowledged that multiple knowledge systems, values, and logics coexist in the research team. At this stage, the scholars acknowledged the contextuality and embeddedness of all human reflection resulted in different interpretations of Sacks understanding of hope.

In the second step, the scholars refrained from assuming that their own theoretical framework was superior or universally valid. Instead, they recognized the that different interpretations of a single reality can coexist and deliberately created space for dialogue.

In the third step, critical reflection was organized, which is the capacity to reflect upon one’s own and others’ values, norms and practices (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). The scholars were asked to reflect upon each of Sacks’ key elements from the perspective of their own disciplines. They discussed whether the key elements of Sacks’ understanding of hope could interact with concepts within their own field. And if so, they explored to what extent similarities and differences could be identified. Questions guiding this process included: do the concepts used by Sacks and by the different scholars complement or deepen one another? Are there areas of disagreement? And which issues need to be discussed further?

The fourth step involved is the working together of different research traditions on a shared problem to provide fuller understanding and better practical responses. In a workshop, each of the key elements was discussed collectively with all seven scholars. The discussion was recorded. Each scholar was then asked to deepen one specific key element of Sacks conceptualization of hope, drawing on insights from the discussion. Their writings were then rotated among the scholars, reread, discussed and finally incorporated in this paper.

The data on the A16 Rotterdam case were collected by one of the authors, together with colleagues not participating in this paper, during 2024–2025. The data collection involved desk research, interviewing, workshops, auto-ethnographic accounts, and site visits. The study was originally executed to evaluate innovative practices in this project. For the present study we use this dataset as secondary data. Secondary data analysis enables researchers to extract new insights from existing datasets (Johnston, 2014), and we deemed this dataset particularly valuable for applying the key elements of hope. The analysis of the A16 Rotterdam case was done by the last author through rereading the interview data, using the five key elements of hope generated from the TR process as analytical lenses. This analysis showed that, indeed, the five hope elements were identifiable in the empirical case. For example, the commissioner’s project leader spoke about active empathy: *“I really learned there to put myself in someone else’s position, to be non-judgmental - all things that have to do with empathy”* (interview with project leader of commissioner). In a next round of analysis, the central characteristics of the five key elements in the case were written down and discussed with all co-authors. Finally, the text was revised and refined collaboratively.

4. Hope in the work of Jonathan Sacks

Literature on hope theory has been developed over recent decades in different disciplines (Carlsen et al., 2011; Ludema et al., 1997; Snyder, 2000; Webb, 2007, 2013). Hope in academic debates is understood as “a form of futural momentum, a way of pressing into the future that attempts to pull certain potentialities into actuality” (Bryant & Knight, 2019: 134). Carlsen et al. (2011) distinguish three paths in hope research: hope as individual goal attainment, hope as relational possibility and hope as organizational processes. We perceive our exploration of Sacks’ understanding of hope as a relational possibility, which is a “mode of acting that is intensely relational, thrives on the open-ended, is sustained by moral dialogue and a generative engine of development” (Carlsen et al., 2011: 5). Specifically, vocabularies of hope create “new images of positive relational possibility, illuminate fresh avenues for moral discourse, and expand the range of practical and theoretical resources available for the construction of healthy social and organizational relationships” (Ludema et al., 1997: 1021), thus promoting “structures of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase horizons of hope, and expand the field of imagination” (Bryant & Knight, 2019: 147). According to Ludema et al. (1997) hope as a discourse generates new

images of possibilities for social relationship, and mobilizes the moral and affective resources necessary to translate images into action and beliefs into practice.

Including Jonathan Sacks in this debate helps to deepen the concept of hope as a theological concern that can gain new insights and directions into the often hidden assumptions that shape sustainability transitions. In this line, Stacey argues that "... the epistemological and methodological tools we have been employing are no longer adequate to the task [of transition research]. New concepts and approaches need to be brought in from other disciplines" (Stacey et al., 2024: 2). Standing in a long theological tradition, Sacks argues that hope is neither a wish, nor a certainty. Hope is best expressed in a narrative about a learning process to embrace radical uncertainty (Sacks, 2007). Hope is a journey in which the actors involved gradually learn to change the identity they live by. Identity is here un the image of what people have of themselves, of others and of the world (Beech et al., 2008). In the first part of the journey, actors have hardly any understanding of what is going on, because their identity is still defined by their past. Therefore, in the narrative, their identity is challenged by an external cause. In the second part of the journey, actors are able to formulate a new identity based on a shared vision of the future that creates space for all involved (Sacks, 2007). This change of identity takes time, because it is impossible to change the images actors live by overnight.

This understanding of hope is based on the narrative of the Exodus (Sacks, 2007: 97). In other words, Sacks' interpretation of the Exodus provides a particular perspective on the general human condition of radical uncertainty, namely a hopeful one. The Exodus narrative has been told and retold over and over again in Western societies (Sacks, 2007, 2010). Each retelling is about appropriating the light of hope in a specific context. In the 20th century, for example, the Exodus inspired African-Americans in their struggle for civil rights. The speeches of Martin Luther King were full of quotations from Exodus. Recently, several scholars have proposed, directly and indirectly, a retelling of the Exodus in the context of climate change (Hajer, 2011; Nordhaus & Schellenberger, 2004). Harvard leadership expert Heifetz (2015) refers directly to a retelling of Sacks' interpretation of the Exodus as a useful narrative in the context of climate change. Nordhaus and Schellenberger (2004) refer indirectly to the narrative when arguing in their essay *The Death of Environmentalism* that climate change requires a more radical reframing than past environmental issues such as acid rain. This essay became an immediate hit and reached the front-page of *The New York Times* and *The Economist*.

Therefore, Hajer (2011) argues that a new and inspiring narrative is needed, since climate change narratives are well known and the discourse on 'limits' is paralyzing rather than motivating. The mobilization of society, he argues, "requires the radical reframing of the issue [sustainable transition]. Martin Luther King did not say, 'I have a nightmare'. He said, 'I have a dream', and he created a movement" (Hajer, 2011: 28). It is not a question of actors not hearing the message, "... rather it seems to be that there is a lack of a convincing route for action" (Hajer, 2011: 16).

Sacks' understanding of hope is based on three key elements to address radical uncertainty: (1) change of identity, (2) *chessed* (a special kind of empathy) and (3) *emunah* (a special kind of relational knowledge) (Hasselaar, 2023). Change of identity refers to who actors are, i.e. the images actors live by; images of themselves, others and the world. *Chessed* is the driving force of hope that sees oneself and others primarily as valuable in themselves, instead of a means to someone else's interests. *Emunah* is associated with relational knowledge. In addition, Sacks' understanding of hope is not a naïve invitation to a better world in the midst of radical uncertainty. Sacks (2011) is very critical of a superficial use of hope as the concept is constantly in danger of being undermined by pure self-interest, fear, doubt, optimism, rebellions, false turns, status quo and so on. Hope can never be taken for granted. It can develop

Table 1
Unpacking the key elements of hope in response to radical uncertainty.

Sacks' elements of hope	TR interpretation of hope	Response to radical uncertainty	Practice
<i>Am-edah</i>	Change of identity	- Transformation of ID, reflecting on identity - First ID determined by past - Second ID determined by liberating future - Need for time for transformation, a journey - Personal and collective driver of action	Reflection-in-action. The process of developing hope
<i>Chessed</i>	Active empathy	- Seeing yourself and the other as primarily as valuable in themselves, not use for others - Acknowledging mutual concerns and values - Valuing plurality of participants - Abandoning stereotyping - Open to non-humans	
<i>Emunah</i>	Relational knowledge	- Loyal and actively participating in journey of <i>chessed</i> - Focusing on relational and embodied knowledge	
<i>Covenant</i>	Covenant	- Taking responsibility for a shared future - Creating new engagements - Promises are based on values, morals, and relationships	Reflection-on-action. Institutions to support the process of developing and materializing hope
<i>Public Sabbath</i>	Public Sabbath	- Stopping of daily (work) routines - Creating space at distance from work routines - Taking time for reflection - Open/neutral space for reflection - Focusing on concrete improvements - Celebrating Utopia Now - Building of mutual trust	

and degrade. Sacks (2007) therefore highlights the importance of two other key elements to support hope, namely the institutions of (1) covenant and (2) public Sabbath. The covenant is an exchange of promises that values the plurality among actors (Sacks, 2010). Most crucial is the public Sabbath, a regular moment in which actors, often with conflicting identities, build on trust, celebrate Utopia Now and learn to take responsibility for a shared future, followed by concrete steps.

A summary of the TR interpretation of the key elements of Sacks' understanding of hope is presented in Table 1 below.

4.1. Change of identity

Key to Sacks' understanding of hope is the concept of identity change, since human actions do not take place in isolation, but are deeply embedded in social, relational and cultural contexts, and in personal histories. Sacks uses the term 'identity' to characterize this embeddedness and emphasizes its dual nature as both personal and collective. Together, individuals' multiple identities constitute their self-concepts. In times of radical uncertainty, the need for identification becomes especially significant, as it anchors and crystallizes the sense of self, prescribing how individuals think, behave, and make sense of the world. Certain identity features are particularly suited for reducing uncertainty (Hogg, 2007). For example, groups often distinguish "insiders" from "outsiders" and adopt hierarchical structures to foster cohesion, interdependence, and a shared sense of fate. Sacks acknowledges these dynamics, noting that identities can be defined by shared past experiences or collective suffering (community of fate, or *am* in Hebrew). However, Sacks (2007) argues that identities that are rooted in the past are insufficient for addressing radical uncertainty and proposes that hope-driven responses require identities grounded in a shared vision of the future including all involved. This prompts the question: Who do you want to become, individually and collectively? Sacks describes this as a community of faith (*edah* in Hebrew). Revising one's identity can include past identities as well those we would like or anticipate holding in the future. On an individual level, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) highlighted that the anticipation of a future self, shapes one's current behavior. For instance, envisioning one's future work self can drive proactive engagement in current work (Strauss et al., 2012).

Sacks sees potential for identity change over time. Other research supports this view, showing that maintaining identity is an ongoing, adaptive process (Caza et al., 2018). Several triggers can prompt intense engagement in revising one's identity, including role transitions (Ibarra, 1999), tensions between identities (Koerner, 2014), and challenging environments (Cowen & Hodgson, 2015). Identity revision can take various forms (Caza et al., 2018). Cognitive activities include reflective processes such as self-questioning, sense-making, and envisioning change (e.g. Beech et al., 2008). Discursive activities involve using narratives, dialogues, and conversations to redefine identity and articulate it to others. Physical activities involve employing material symbols (e.g., artifacts, dress, or space design) to represent and reinforce new identities (Elsbach, 2004). Finally, behavioral activities involve enacting new actions that reshape identity-related interactions and alter how others perceive the individual or group (Goffman, 1959).

4.2. Active empathy

The second central characteristic of Sacks' understanding of hope is the concept of *chesed*, a Hebrew word not easy translatable into English. It is usually understood as 'kindness', but for Sacks it is the driving force of hope that sees oneself and others primarily as valuable in themselves, instead of a means to someone else's position or interest (Sacks, 2000: 127). Active empathy is defined as the capacity to understand another person's experiences and respond non-judgmentally. When paired with meaningful action, active empathy transforms into powerful, transformative forces that benefit organizations and their members (Dutton et al., 2014).

Active empathy is fundamental for addressing distress and embracing transitions in an adaptive and constructive manner. Active empathy offers a framework for fostering hopeful and caring practices within organizations. Empathy can be applied in contexts of both suffering and joy. Empathy in moments of joy relies on the motivation and ability to notice the positive experience, understand why the person feels joy, and take appropriate action, such as celebrating with them. Active empathy can be viewed as a social mentality, rooted in a strong motivation to contribute to the well-being of others. Such a mentality contrasts with other social mentalities, such as competition, which are primarily driven by a motivation to dominate and win (Gilbert, 2010).

Over the past decades, there has been growing academic interest in the organizational consequences of both the presence and absence of active empathy. A lack of empathy has been linked to various negative outcomes, including dishonesty, unethical behavior, poor interpersonal relationships, increased conflict, and compromised safety practices (Meechan et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2015). In contrast, the presence of active empathy in organizations is associated with numerous benefits, such as enhanced innovation, high-quality collaboration, stronger relationships between leaders and staff, greater flexibility and resilience, increased organizational commitment, and improved overall performance (Worline & Dutton, 2017; Meechan et al., 2022).

4.3. Relational knowledge

According to Sacks, the Hebrew word *emunah* is the human response to the human condition of radical uncertainty (Sacks, 2012; 96). For Sacks, *emunah* can be understood through terms like trust, faithfulness, loyalty, and affirmation. It orients us to trust in a certain perspective on, or epistemology of reality. Relational knowledge is driven by active empathy and expressed in a journey of hope (Hasselaar, 2023). In other words, relational knowledge orientates us at building relations that seek new and liberating possibilities, and by doing so create hope. Seeking new and liberating possibilities is central to designerly ways of knowing, which has been introduced as the type of knowing. Design relates to the artificial world and uncertainties in a generative way. This leads to a more positive, and embracing attitude towards uncertainties: how different sources of uncertainty may be attended to and how they direct action. It encompasses speculation, problem-solving, inquiry into unknown matters, and decision-making (Epp et al., 2024). In this

sense, both design and relational knowledge embrace radical uncertainty and are about learning as a process.

Rather than requiring full clarity or proof before action, design thinking involves moving forward with a committed orientation to trust in the process, in relationships, and in the unfolding of solutions. This parallels relational knowledge, which is not static belief but ongoing faithfulness: a willingness to stay engaged, to revisit, and to deepen understanding as situations evolve. Design research complements relational knowledge by being more prescriptive. The focus is on what it is that the actors are to do (together), both now and in the futures they anticipate together. At the same time, solutions are provisional due to the uncertainty involved. Researchers test, iterate, and refine without expecting finality. Design offers a way forward by proceeding with tentative, prototypical steps towards more desirable futures. This requires constant reflection on the right course and direction of action. Such an interaction of the concepts of relational knowledge and designerly ways of knowing provides practical avenues for responding to radical uncertainty.

Relational knowledge provides a trustful perspective to the relational aspects within organizations and between different cooperating actors which allows us to embrace radical uncertainty. Designerly ways of knowing deepens relational knowledge by providing guidance on what it is that these actors are to do in proceeding within transitions. Relational knowledge can be complemented with a generative mode towards uncertainty where uncertainties are seen as creative resources and possibilities for novel discoveries. Practically, such an approach might take inspiration from cocreation and transition design (Irwin, 2015). These approaches provide ways to work towards solutions in iterative ways, while seeing other actors not as means to an end, but as part of a collective with which we move forward. Although these approaches generally have a direction, they are not about mastering the future with the perfect solution. The impact of cocreation lies in the collaborative journey itself, rather than in its outcome.

4.4. Covenant

Sacks proposes the covenant as an institution which, in line with *chesed*, is motivated by the benefit of others, focuses on long-term relations and appeals to moral commitments (Harris et al., 2012). He contrasts a covenant to contracts, the latter reflecting mostly motivations of self-interest, invite for short-term transactions and becoming authoritative through threat of legal enforcement. With contracts depicted in this way, they reflect principles that are in tension with *chesed*. However, Sacks' criticism of contracts is challenged by scholars (Benitez-Avila et al., 2018; Hasselaar, 2023) who show contracts can be relational and not just legal.

Criticism is due where Sacks seems to attach great authority to contracts as material documents. He seems to suggest that contracts inevitably invoke selfish, short-term and legal behavior, while covenants by nature invite for communal, long-term actions within a flourishing moral repertoire. However, in organization studies, the concept of sociomateriality, which is the intertwinement relation of the material and the social (Leonardi, 2012), draws our attention to the fact that "there is no social that is not also material, and no material that is not also social" (Orlikowski, 2007: 1437). From this agentic perspective (Sergi, 2021) there are at least three ways to look at covenants (and contracts): as products, sites or actors.

Firstly, both covenants and contracts are material products of social interactions. Sacks separates the (laudable) quality of interactions that lead to a covenant from the (problematic) materiality of a contract. But this is a caricature: both covenant and contract need both interactions and materiality.

Secondly, both covenant and contract are sites where rhetorical and discursive dynamics are in play: rules are translated into words. Therefore, the distinction does not lie in the document itself, but in the attitude with which one comes to the site. Sacks is lyrical about the attitudes that turn a text into a covenant, in which individuals "come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can achieve alone" (Sacks, 2020: 326). However, a contract created with these attitudes would harvest the same benefits.

Thirdly, Sergi (2021) theorizes that documents have performative power and thus can be actors. Sacks limits this actorhood to covenants: "[while] contracts *benefit*, covenants *transform*. A covenant creates a moral community. It binds actors together in a bond of mutual responsibility and care" (Sacks, 2020: 327, italics in original). However, this performativity can also be traced in contracts, as they can guide actors to do things they otherwise may not have done, such as formalizing relationships. Sacks thus suggests a dichotomy between contracts and covenants that organizational studies literature negates. There is nothing magical about covenants in themselves. It is the organizing of actors engaging in the covenant-making process that creates its quality, which is then established through the product of the covenant. If one notices that the attitudes of actors are different when they decide to work on a covenant rather than a contract, then a covenant might be chosen instead of a contract. The reason is then the attitude of the writers, not the nature of the document, as Sacks seems to suggest.

4.5. Public sabbath

In order not to lose sight of one's promises, motivation or orientation during a transition, Sacks (2000) suggests valuing *public Sabbaths* to be one of the most powerful rituals in transitional pathways, given their potential to influence human behavior. For him, the Public Sabbath stimulates actors to reflect for a moment and break the habitual flow of everyday life in order to reset and to rethink their norms, values and practices. Sacks (2000) doesn't understand the public Sabbath as a religious institution, but as an institution for all actors involved in transitions. Sacks highlights 4 meanings of the public Sabbath (Hasselaar, 2023).

The first meaning is a rehearsed utopia that breaks into the present, upending its logic and defying its priorities, which Sacks calls "Utopia Now" (Sacks, 2010: 16). The public Sabbath is practicing, contemplating and enacting the promised future, while being on the way. Therefore, we need a focus on the actual practices of the public Sabbath of hope in dealing with radical uncertainty.

Secondly, Sacks understands Sabbath as a neutral space in which differences between actors, who would otherwise not meet, can be bridged (Sacks, 2007). This space stimulates putting oneself in the position of the other, promoting the willingness to listen respectfully

to those with whom one disagrees, and thus bridging differences. The public Sabbath is a neutral space that values the ‘dignity of difference’ (Sacks, 2011). The experience of sharing a common world with others who look at it from different perspectives makes actors aware of their own identity and opens them up to the possibility of developing an alternative, new and common identity. While spatial settings can be designed to foster intense social interaction, they ultimately function only as a scaffold (Irving et al., 2020).

The third meaning is to practice ways to protect, strengthen and reset face-to-face relationships. Relations can never be taken for granted, because they are never untouched by, for example, fear, doubt or skepticism. The Sabbath stops daily life, not out of laziness or boredom, but in order to practice ways to protect, strengthen and reset relations. In line with this, Rosa (2019) calls for reorienting societal priorities toward fostering deeper connections.

Sacks’ fourth meaning is the embodied experience through symbols, music, eating together, and celebrating. Eating and drinking in the presence of others is at the core of togetherness in organizations and allows a state of communion to emerge as it forges and confirms social bounds and mutual obligations (Mennell et al., 1992). Scholars have described the powerful liminal state that actors can enter through the use of symbols, dance and music in a ritual. In this state, the initiated “is neither what he has been nor is what he will be” (Turner, 1977: 113), thus allowing new collective future identities to emerge.

5. Applying the conceptual framework of hope in the Dutch infrastructure sector

We applied the conceptual framework to the real-world transition scenario of the Dutch infrastructure sector. This has been asked for by Carlsen et al. (2011) who argue for a phenomenological approach, which is to study the phenomenon itself (Orlikowski, 2010), to understand how the key elements of hope are experienced and enabled in work organizations. We understand the Dutch infrastructure sector to be the complex network of public clients and private contractors responsible for the construction and maintenance of infrastructures such as roads, bridges, tunnels and rails (Koppenjan et al., 2022). The transition towards a circular, future-proof, energy-and-waste reducing sector is challenging for actors in the infrastructure sector as it impacts their roles, competencies, and implementation practices (Eikelenboom et al., 2024). Societal challenges in the built environment compel public and private actors in the Dutch infrastructure sector to jointly learn to embrace radical uncertainty surrounding the development of infrastructures. Too often, actors retreat into self-interest, engaging in opportunistic and defensive behavior, exacerbating fragmentation and further reinforcing the propensity for project culture to take a toxic turn (Clegg et al., 2023). Therefore, these actors need to reflect upon fundamental assumptions and experiment with new behavior to face the radical uncertainty confronting them. In the words of Riedy and Waddock (2022), deliberate transformation for sustainable futures requires new social imaginaries that collectively envision futures beyond the dominance of neoliberal capitalism.

The Dutch government funded a consortium of 130 partners from government, market and science to jointly co-create an innovative research program around the concept of hope, aiming to support and deepen trajectories on embracing radical uncertainty. The public and private actors in the Dutch infrastructure sector recognize the need for cultural change, new forms of collaboration, different attitudes, and resilient collaboration (Ruijter et al., 2020). However, earlier research shows that they are barely able to overcome unexpected adversity and to respond adaptively to radical uncertainty (Sminia, 2011). Collaboration in the infra sector is deeply intertwined with power relations and not easily changed. Organizations collectively stick to well-known traditional routines and social practices (Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2023) and develop toxic relationships over time (Clegg et al., 2023). Additionally, the Dutch construction fraud, although revealed in 2004, still casts a shadow over the sector. This scandal received wide-spread media attention and involved illegal price-fixing, market division agreements, and bidding collusion in infrastructure project tenders (Dorée, 2004; Sminia, 2011).

We participated with our research team in the research program and have started to apply the conceptual framework in a number of infrastructure projects in which client and contractors reflect upon their collaboration, responsibilities, and work practices. Considerable emotional intelligence, supportive leadership, and reflective capabilities are needed, features that are frequently missing in the sector (Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2023). By reflecting on current (collaborative) work practices, professionals can negotiate, agree upon, and further develop new practices in projects (Eikelenboom and van Marrewijk, 2023), thereby creating an environment where new practices become embedded. The results of our selected projects have not yet been collected and analyzed but we would like to present here the case of the A16 Rotterdam megaproject wherein reflection on organizational collaboration, responsibilities, and work practices are prioritized. This project is taken as an example to illustrate how the key elements of hope help embrace radical uncertainty.

5.1. Embracing radical uncertainty in the A16 Rotterdam megaproject

The A16 Rotterdam megaproject aimed to improve the accessibility of the city and the livability along motorways and reduce the energy needed for the operating of infrastructures. The ‘bypass’ aimed to result in reliable and acceptable travel times and less traffic on the local road networks. € 1.5 billion, including 20 years of maintenance, was budgeted to construct 11 kilometers of new motorway and an energy neutral tunnel of 2,2 km. The construction started in 2019 and the formal opening of the tunnel and road was in October 2025.

Covenant. The A16 Rotterdam project was executed by the Dutch government in collaboration with a constructor consortium. The formal collaborative practices were rooted in a covenant wherein involved parties committed themselves to improve their mutual collaboration. This covenant was signed in 2018 by Dutch public commissioners and private constructors. In line with this covenant, the A16 Rotterdam project developed a model of ‘shared ownership’ and created a financial budget of € 8 million to improve collaboration and jointly embrace uncertainties during implementation.

Change of identity. Based upon prior experiences, the project managers of the commissioner and the consortium were convinced that intensive collaboration was necessary to make the project a success, knowing they had to deal with level 4 uncertainties (Van Dorsser et al., 2020). They were proven right; unforeseen problems emerged from the Covid pandemic, the Brexit, the Ukraine war that triggered high inflation, and the logistical blockade of the Evergreen in the Suez Canal. These disruptive events would normally result in a fighting relationship between commissioner and consortium, delaying the planning and increasing the budget. However, in the A16 Rotterdam megaproject, radical uncertainty was embraced by project partners: they first quickly respond to arising problems, then addressing and analyzing them in a proactive way, and finally identifying what the issue is and how to financially round off. By embracing radical uncertainty these events brought learning with them instead of immediately looking at each other who is responsible.

Active empathy. According to interviewees, the position and intrinsic motivation of the project managers were crucial to build trust between commissioner and consortium. These project managers were strongly motivated to take time, to show interest in each other's organization, and to establish a relation between the commissioner and the consortium. The project organization rapidly grew to 400 employees, with little time to properly set up the internal organization. In organizations of this size, HRM is an important, but not always acknowledged staff function in megaproject organizations. HRM organizes an onboarding course for new employees, a program to strengthen team collaboration, and a link between the public Sabbath and daily practice.

Public Sabbath. Project management decided to hire an agency to design a team development programme based upon personal development for creating trust, commitment and empathy. In total, approximately €1 million was financed from the joint budget for this five-year programme. Team development was organized through an average of two reflection sessions per team per year. Although many interviewees were positive about the reflection sessions, they initially found these too theoretical and too much like a training course. Later, the sessions became more practice-oriented and focused on goals for the teams. The management decided to organize the sessions far away from daily operations to stimulate more emergent and informal collaboration. According to the coach, this remote location provides peace, breaks work patterns, creates a holiday setting where everyone is equal. This public Sabbath stimulated employees to reflect and break the habitual flow of everyday life in order to reset and to rethink their norms, values and practices. The choice of the remote location first caused resistance but this diminished over time as participants experienced its added value. In this public Sabbath project employees came together to discuss relevant issues within the team and gradually learned to reflect upon relational collaborative practices. After 2–3 years the project employees were able to reflect on relational collaborative practices themselves and guide others in the project. In this way, reflective skills of project employees have been developed.

Relational knowledge. Collaboration is frequently mentioned in the interviews as the most important foundation in the successful realization of the A16 Rotterdam megaproject. According to interviewees the conversations between project employees that follow from the public Sabbath are of utmost importance. The themes discussed and their progress in the project were kept in a logbook by the HR manager. This allowed for discovering common threads in the collaboration of specific teams. The manager of these teams was then approached and encouraged to act upon the themes emerging from the public Sabbath. This discussion took place by asking open questions and relating to what is in the interest of the project.

6. Discussion

This paper developed a conceptual framework of hope to embrace radical uncertainty. With the help of a process of TR, an interdisciplinary research group developed a conceptual framework on hope informed by the work of Jonathan Sacks. Our understanding of hope is based on three key elements of human behavior: (1) change of identity, (2) active empathy and (3) relational knowledge. Furthermore, we highlighted the importance of two institutions to support these elements: (1) covenant and (2) public Sabbath. This conceptual framework on hope makes contributions to two academic debates.

The first contribution is to the debate on coping with radical uncertainty in transitions (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016; Grunwald, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2024; Meijer & Hekkert, 2007) with an innovative conceptual model of hope. The unpacking of Sacks' work on hope has provided five key elements that guide the process of embracing radical uncertainty. This model resonates with the concept of deep meaning which are the values, morals, and relationships shaping transitions (Stacey et al., 2024). Deep meaning is frequently expressed in a covenant, which has, of course, a risk of creating a hyperreality (Wolny, 2017). But integrated with other key elements in the framework, a covenant provides solid ground for collaboration.

The conceptual model of hope suggests that in the context of radical uncertainty, inherent to transitions, a focus on relational trust, on reflection and finding common ground in shared values and narratives of desired futures become vital. This supports earlier work that sees transitions as multi-authored processes in which different types of actors have different perceptions of radical uncertainties (Meijer & Hekkert, 2007). Perceptions that actors need to reflect upon during the transition process, which is already stressed by Eikelenboom and van Marrewijk (2023). The framework also supports the work of Ninan et al. (2025) who show how actors' narratives shape transitions. Reflections and narratives are central in the public Sabbath and were observed in the A16 Rotterdam case where the client and consortium teams reflected upon their collaboration at a remote location.

The developed conceptual framework of five key elements of hope can inform scholars interested in the role of narrative in transitions (Ninan et al., 2025; Upham & Gathen, 2021). Hope provides an alternative narrative to apocalyptic stories and is connected to action as suggested by scholars (e.g. Snyder, 2000). This was observed in the A16 Rotterdam project where disruptive events brought learning instead of the opportunistic defensive behavior that is characteristic to the infrastructure sector (Clegg et al., 2023).

The second contribution is to the literature on hope theory (Carlsen et al., 2011; Hasselaar, 2023; Ludema et al., 1997; Ojala, 2017; Snyder, 2000) through the unpacking of Sacks' understanding of the concept of hope. Sacks' theological conceptualization of hope needed an operationalization in order to provide scholars and practitioners with a better understanding of what embracing radical

uncertainty through hope exactly means. Providing the conceptual framework further develops research into hope as a relational possibility (Carlsen et al., 2011). The five key elements of Sacks understanding of hope illuminate a fresh journey promoting “structures of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase horizons of hope, and expand the field of imagination” (Bryant & Knight, 2019: 147). This was observed in the A16 Rotterdam case as client and consortium actors embraced radical uncertainty and jointly solved problems arriving from disruptions. The findings also anticipate the warning of Kim (2013) that public theology should not be limited to academic circles exclusively, but should impact daily lives of actors in society. Furthermore, the paper answers the call of Carlsen et al. (2011) by arguing for a phenomenological approach to understand how hope is experienced and enabled at work with a case of the A16 Rotterdam project.

Finally, the interdisciplinary collaboration in the TR approach for unpacking the concept of hope was not easy, time-consuming and full of pitfalls, something Van Huyssteen (1999) already warned for. The involved scholars brought in too many new concepts from their own discipline in deepening the five key elements of hope, which resulted in a confusion over the number and relevance of these new concepts. For example, the debate on the dual nature of both personal and collective identity (Brown, 2006) was interesting but fragmented our understanding of the key element “change of identity”. Consequently, the discussion widened too far. We experienced no conflicts over different positions but it was difficult to really understand each other’s contribution. To converge this discussion and to reduce the number of concepts, each scholar was assigned as main contributor to one key element. We then discussed all five elements in the research group and agreed upon the central meaning of each key element. A final editing by the authors helped to align the five elements.

7. Conclusions

This paper focused on the question of how the work of Sacks informs a conceptual framework of hope for embracing radical uncertainty in transition. The conceptual framework of the five elements of hope is relevant to theory on radical uncertainty in transitions studies (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016; Grunwald, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2024; Meijer & Hekkert, 2007) and to theory on hope (Carlsen et al., 2011; Hasselaar, 2023; Ludema et al., 1997; Ojala, 2017; Snyder, 2000). Furthermore, the conceptual framework is relevant to practice by showing new ways of embracing radical uncertainty in transitions. This resonates within the Dutch infrastructure sector and the presentation of the A16 Rotterdam case shows that infrastructure projects embracing radical uncertainty already exist. Increasingly, commissioners and contractors facing radical uncertainty, disruptions, and societal challenges are willing to reflect on organizational collaboration, responsibilities, and work practices needed to embrace radical uncertainty. In line with an increasing number of scholars (Hasselaar, 2023; Hoffman et al., 2024; Scoones, 2024), we argue that practitioners face serious limitations when acting in conditions of radical uncertainty. The conceptual framework developed in this paper offers practitioners tools and language to jointly reflect upon infrastructure projects contributing to the sustainability transition, not just in the Dutch context but worldwide (Winch et al., 2023).

The limitations of this study are found in the conceptual nature of the paper, which offers little space for presenting data on the empirical justification of the conceptual model. In future studies we will present further tests of the conceptual model in the empirical setting of the Dutch infrastructure sector. Furthermore, it will be interesting for other scholars to understand how hope is experienced and enabled at work in organizations, and how joint action of actors is managed in transitions (Carlsen et al., 2011; Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2023; Farla et al., 2012).

All in all, our rich conceptualization of hope provides the language for scholars and practitioners to understand how hope is experienced and enabled at work in organizations, and how joint action of actors can be managed in transitions.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alfons van Marrewijk: Writing – original draft. **Mark van Vuuren:** Writing – original draft. **Ernst Bohlmeijer:** Writing – original draft. **Evert van Beek:** Writing – original draft. **Egbert Wits:** Writing – original draft. **Marlon Nieuwenhuis:** Writing – original draft. **Jan Jorrit Hasselaar:** Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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