

Embedding Symbolic Power in the Relational Turn

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Abstract:

Understanding how nature’s values become institutionalised, while others are marginalised, is central to advancing sustainability transformations. The relational turn in sustainability science is centred around the co-constitutive dynamics of human–nature relationships. Yet, it has so far paid limited attention to the power relations that shape which values gain legitimacy or are marginalised. We introduce the concept of symbolic power—defined as the capacity to naturalise particular worldviews and value systems—as a critical yet underexplored dimension of the formation of relational values of nature. Drawing on social theory and critical realism, we present a conceptual framework that focuses on how symbolic power mediates the co-evolution of individual values and socially endorsed beliefs, influencing the institutionalisation of certain values over others. A case study of fisheries governance in Japan illustrates the role of symbolic power and highlights the conditions under which sustainability-aligned relational values—such as care and reciprocity—can gain social legitimacy and institutional traction. Key implications are identified for governance and policy, emphasising the need to foster deliberative and reflexive spaces that support symbolic shifts and recognition of plural values as preconditions for sustainability transformations.

Keywords: Symbolic power, Symbolic legitimacy, Relational turn, Relational values, Value formation

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30 1. Introduction

31 Understanding how values about nature emerge, gain legitimacy, and become institutionalised is central to
 32 addressing the complex challenges of sustainability. More recently, sustainability science has increasingly
 33 moved toward relational approaches, departing from static, individualistic, and dualistic models of human–
 34 nature relationships. Instead, approaches that emphasise co-constitution, interdependence, and the co-
 35 evolutionary formation of values through social–ecological relationships are gaining prominence, to the extent
 36 that a "relational turn" in sustainability science is being talked about [1–4]. This shift contributes to rethinking
 37 environmental governance by highlighting how values such as care and reciprocity shape human engagements
 38 with nature [5,6].

39 The relational turn, however, still overlooks how certain values gain legitimacy while others are marginalised
 40 due to power relations [7,8]. In particular, limited attention has been given to symbolic power, a form of
 41 power that operates through the capacity to define what is perceived as legitimate, appropriate, or morally
 42 justified. As theorised by Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic power plays a key role in stabilising institutions by
 43 naturalising specific worldviews, norms, and roles [9–11]. Without incorporating this dimension, the
 44 relational turn risks obscuring the power dynamics and hierarchies of recognition that shape which
 45 relationships and values are legitimised and which are not, in practice.

46 Here we argue that embedding the notion of symbolic power into the relational turn is essential for
 47 understanding both the reproduction of dominant value regimes and the practical possibilities for just
 48 sustainability transformations. Drawing on insights from social theory and critical realism, we propose a
 49 conceptual framework of value formation in which: a) individual values and socially endorsed belief systems
 50 co-evolve, and b) symbolic power mediates this process by conferring legitimacy on particular value systems
 51 that include the interplay between values, worldviews and knowledge. The framework also helps to explain
 52 how symbolic legitimacy may shift under certain conditions—such as through disruptive events or reflexive
 53 spaces—allowing suppressed values to gain traction and potentially reshape institutions and decision-making
 54 processes. We illustrate the analytical utility of this framework with a case study of small-scale fisheries
 55 governance in Japan [12]. This example illustrates how symbolic power operates both to stabilise institutional
 56 norms and to inhibit the articulation of alternative values. It also shows how symbolic power can shift under
 57 specific conditions, particularly when deliberative spaces enable the contestation of dominant values and
 58 institutions, and the exploration of new practices.

59 Beyond offering a conceptual contribution, our argument also speaks to a broader governance challenge: how
 60 sustainability-aligned values [13]—such as stewardship, reciprocity, and care—can gain recognition and
 61 legitimacy in decision-making. While Martin et al. do not explicitly use the term, we argue that many of the
 62 values they identify are relational in nature. In this paper, we refer to these as sustainability-aligned relational
 63 values (SARVs). This raises important questions about the kinds of institutional arrangements, participatory

processes, and governance innovations that might be needed to support more inclusive value recognition and enable the symbolic shifts necessary for just sustainable transformations.

In the next section, we briefly situate the relational turn in sustainability science and introduce the concept of symbolic power. Section 3 presents a framework of value formation to theoretically argue that symbolic power enables or constrains the institutionalisation of SARVs. Section 4 then applies the conceptual framework to the case study. We conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of embedding symbolic power into sustainability science for ‘transformative governance’ [14], advocating for institutional designs that foster recognition of plural values and symbolic shifts.

2. Relational thinking revisited: Integrating symbolic power into sustainability science

The relational turn is a shift away from individualistic and dualistic conceptualisations of human–nature relations toward frameworks that foreground interdependence, co-constitution, and dynamic interaction [1–4]. Rather than treating values about nature, agency, or institutions as fixed properties of individuals or social structures, relational approaches interpret them as emergent from the coevolution of people, ecosystems, institutions, and material conditions. This idea draws on a diverse range of theoretical influences—including actor-network theory (ANT) [15,16], feminist political ecology [17,18], relational sociology [19,20], Indigenous and decolonial ontologies [21,22], and practice theory [23,24]. Despite their differences, these perspectives share the need to move beyond linear, hierarchical, and binary thinking in favour of situated, relational, and processual understandings of social–ecological systems. For instance, the concept of relational values helps shift attention away from the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental values toward a more embedded and socially situated understanding of how people relate to nature [25–27].

Relational values refer to meaningful relationships between people and nature—and among people through nature—including care, responsibility, identity, and belonging [25,27,28]. Similar ideas are being further explored in the context of Indigenous peoples’ relationships with nature, recognising these as powerful expressions of relational worldviews that foreground responsibility, reciprocity, and interdependence in ecosystem stewardship [1,3,29]. Often this is associated with many Indigenous cultures, in which worldviews also involve recognising agency in non-human beings, such as animals, rivers, or ancestral landscapes, reflecting ontologies in which humans are embedded within—rather than separate from—the more-than-human world [30,31]. The relational turn provides not only methodological innovation but also a deeper ontological and ethical commitment to understanding human–nature relationships. Further, the IPBES Values Assessment [32], which promotes the concept of relational values, emphasises that values about nature and institutions (understood as norms and rules) are relationally constituted rather than individually held or externally imposed.

97 While the relational turn is about decentring individualism—as a dominant Western paradigm—and in
98 foregrounding contextual embeddedness, it remains insufficiently attentive to the power structures that shape
99 which values and relationships are recognised, institutionalised, or excluded from decision-making. For
100 example, relational frameworks influenced by actor-network theory shed light on how technologies,
101 ecological processes, and material artefacts co-produce governance arrangements while distributing agency
102 symmetrically across human and non-human actors [16,33]. Yet, in emphasising horizontal entanglements and
103 network fluidity, ANT often overlooks vertical asymmetries, including symbolic hierarchies that largely
104 determine which perspectives are deemed socially legitimate [34]. As a result, while they help explain how
105 values circulate, they are largely silent about how certain value systems become authorised, naturalised, or
106 enforced, while others are systematically delegitimised or silenced.

107 To address this limitation, and following Bourdieu’s theorisation [9,10], we argue for the integration of the
108 notion of symbolic power into relational thinking. Symbolic power can be defined as “world-making
109 power”—the capacity to define and legitimise what is recognised as valid knowledge, appropriate behaviour,
110 or morally acceptable practice. It does not operate through coercion but through recognition, rendering
111 particular worldviews, beliefs, and institutional arrangements as natural or self-evident. In doing so, symbolic
112 power shapes the relationality itself, influencing which actors are regarded as credible, which values are
113 upheld in institutions (*sensu* norms and rules), and which beliefs attain normative authority. Symbolic power
114 also underpins other forms of power, such as discursive, framing, structural, and rule-making power, as
115 highlighted in the IPBES Values Assessment [32]. The relationships between symbolic power and such other
116 forms of power are summarised in **Table 1** and illustrated in **Figure 1**.

117

118 **Table 1:** The Relationship between symbolic power and other types of power recognised by IPBES

Types of power	Definition by the IPBES Values Assessment	How symbolic power relates and mediates value formation
Discursive power	The power to shape language, narratives, or knowledge that define what is meaningful	Symbolic power authorises certain discourses as legitimate or as ‘common sense’, enabling some narratives to dominate while silencing others
Framing power	The power to determine how issues are interpreted, what is included/excluded in debates	Symbolic power influences which framings appear neutral, moral, or scientifically grounded, and which are considered biased, illegitimate or absurd.
Structural power	The ability to act based on one's social or institutional position	Symbolic power confers legitimacy on actors whose authority is grounded in what is perceived as socially accepted ‘common sense’.

Rule-making power	The power to create or change rules, laws, or norms that structure decision-making	Symbolic power naturalises the rule-setting process, making some rules seem self-evident or necessary while obscuring and negating their arbitrariness
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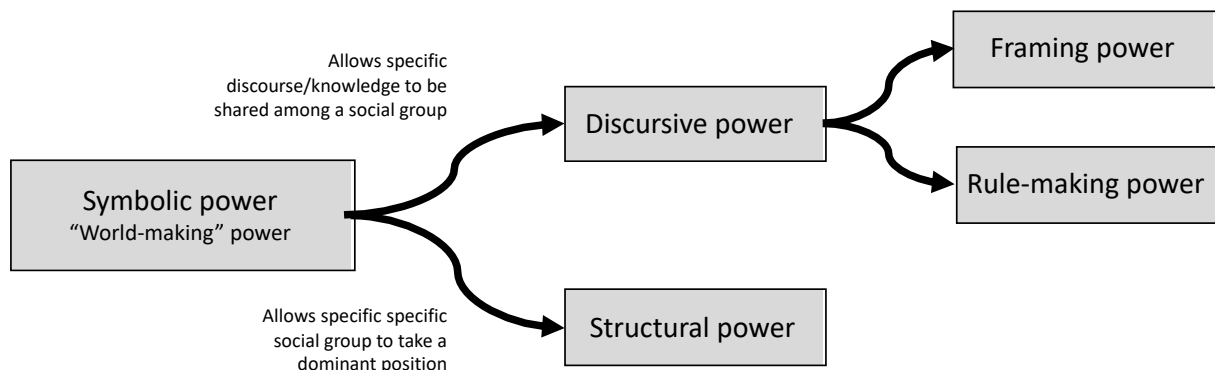


Figure 1: Relationship between symbolic power and other forms (discursive, framing, structural and rule-making power), modified from Arias-Arevalo et al. (2023)

Symbolic power plays a key role in maintaining social and institutional order by reducing the need for continuous coercion. Without it, individuals would be less likely to internalise the hegemonic norms [35] and belief systems that underpin the status quo, and that is key for institutional stability. In its absence, actors with discursive, structural, or rule-making power would face greater resistance and scrutiny, requiring heavier reliance on surveillance, enforcement, and monitoring to ensure compliance with established norms and rules [8,36]. Symbolic power operates by generating consent—often unconsciously—through the naturalisation of particular worldviews, values, and social roles. In doing so, it legitimises hierarchies, makes rules appear reasonable, and allows hegemonic framings to go unchallenged [37]. By embedding authority within what people perceive as morally justified or socially appropriate, symbolic power renders domination more subtle and enduring. Yet this very stabilising effect often functions as a hidden barrier to transformative change, constraining the emergence of alternative imaginaries and SARVs in decision-making [37]. Unless symbolic power is confronted—by redefining what is considered appropriate, credible, or morally valid—efforts toward deep institutional or societal transformation are unlikely to gain traction.

The stabilising role of symbolic power aligns with insights from critical realism, which stresses that beneath the appearance of fluidity, persistent social and cultural structures continue to organise hierarchies and sustain dominant worldviews. As Elder-Vass [34,38] argues, symbolic and institutional arrangements often exhibit considerable durability, even in contexts of relational dynamism. From this perspective, focusing solely on relationality—such as patterns of interaction or distributed agency—risks overlooking the deeper symbolic structures that legitimise and reproduce dominant worldviews, value systems, and discourses. Embedding

symbolic power within a relational perspective helps reveal the hidden hierarchies of legitimacy and recognition that shape whose values count, whose imaginaries gain traction, and whose visions for change are sidelined.

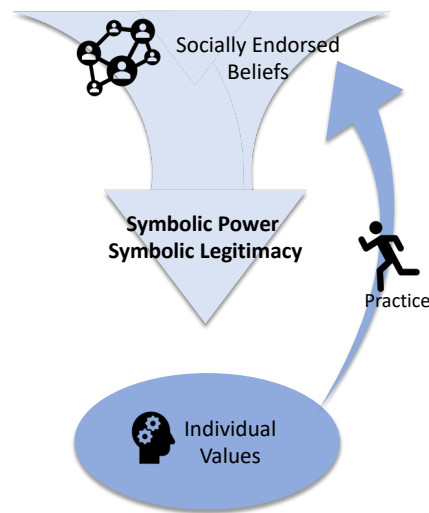
While the relational turn has deepened our understanding of human–nature co-constitution, it has yet to fully engage with the symbolic and institutional structures that sustain dominant value regimes. Without a framework for analysing how certain values become naturalised while others are marginalised, relational approaches risk overlooking key dimensions of power. To address this gap, we introduce a theoretical model of value formation that centres symbolic power as a mediating force in the co-evolution of individual values and socially endorsed belief systems. This model helps explain how relational values are stabilised, disrupted, or reconfigured within institutional contexts, providing a foundation for understanding their role in sustainable and just transformations.

3. A model of value formation based on symbolic power

This section presents a recursive model that connects relationality and symbolic power in the formation of values. By focusing on how symbolic power mediates the dynamic interplay between personal values and collective belief systems, the model highlights the mechanisms through which dominant institutions are reproduced—and how they might be challenged—in the pursuit of just sustainability transformations.

The model builds on the idea that a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) exists between individual values and socially endorsed belief systems [38,39], as illustrated in **Figure 2**. It stresses the idea that values are neither static attributes of individuals nor simply imposed by institutions. Rather, they emerge, stabilise, and sometimes shift through an iterative process involving individual experiences, social norms, and institutional arrangements. Socially endorsed belief systems are understood as collectively held assumptions, norms, and moral frameworks that are recognised as appropriate or legitimate within a given social group and reflected in institutional forms such as norms or rules. These belief systems guide shared understandings of what is considered right, reasonable, or expected, and serve as reference points through which individuals interpret the world and make everyday decisions [40].

As individuals engage in daily practices and interact with dominant institutions, they internalise these belief systems. The resulting values shape their perceptions, actions, and judgments, which in turn reinforce prevailing institutional structures. Over time, this recursive process contributes to the durability of dominant value systems and cultural hegemony. Symbolic power is central to this dynamic: by framing specific values and worldviews as self-evident, morally justified, or inevitable, it marginalises or renders invisible alternative perspectives [41]. **Figure 2** illustrates this relationship, where symbolic power mediates the co-evolution of individual values and socially endorsed beliefs that underpin institutional legitimacy.



175

176 **Figure 2:** Recursive relationships between individual values and socially endorsed beliefs

177 Since values are relationally constituted, i.e. emerging from dynamic interactions among people, ecosystems,
 178 institutions, and material conditions, the process of value formation is not entirely fluid. In other words, as
 179 Elder-Vass and other critical realist theorists [42–45] argue, value systems often exhibit strong stability, not
 180 merely as a product of habitual thought or coincidental alignment of practices, but because they are actively
 181 maintained through symbolic power. This insight is particularly relevant to transformative governance [14]. In
 182 this vein, Martin et al. [13] argue that advancing sustainability requires cultivating sustainability-aligned
 183 values—or sustainability-aligned relational values (SARVs), as we refer to them—at both individual and
 184 collective levels. However, these values remain largely absent from dominant political, economic, and even
 185 environmental policies, which continue to be shaped by mostly neoliberal discourses privileging instrumental
 186 reasoning, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and quantifiable outputs [46].

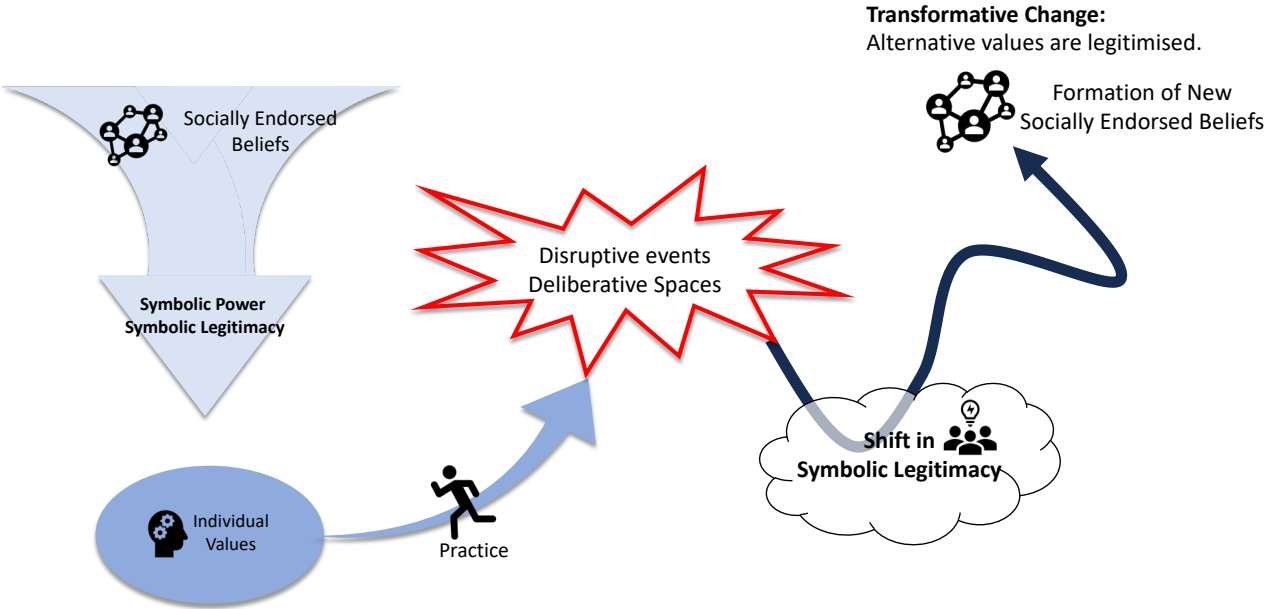
187 The selective institutionalisation of values is itself an effect of symbolic power, which determines what kinds
 188 of values are considered salient—i.e., credible, rational, or actionable—in governance. Institutionalising
 189 SARVs, therefore, requires more than promoting new moral imperatives; it demands a shift in symbolic
 190 legitimacy: a redefinition of what is seen as appropriate, authoritative, or normatively desirable. Without such
 191 a shift, relational values are likely to remain ignored, marginalised, neutralised, or co-opted. This raises the
 192 question of how such a shift in symbolic legitimacy can be fostered to promote more transformative forms of
 193 sustainability governance.

194 Both disruptive events and institutionally supported deliberation can serve as entry points for shifting
 195 symbolic legitimacy (**Figure 3**). Disruptive events—such as major environmental crises—can generate
 196 moments of symbolic dissonance, where previously internalised norms no longer align with lived experience.
 197 For example, the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan deeply eroded public trust in the presumed infallibility
 198 of Japanese technocratic expertise, revealing the fragility of symbolically legitimised narratives that had long

199 underpinned the country’s energy policies. Such events can destabilise dominant worldviews and open
200 discursive space for alternative perspectives that had previously been marginalised through symbolic power.

201 In addition, the creation of deliberative spaces—such as citizen assemblies, participatory scenario workshops,
202 or co-management councils—can also catalyse shifts in the symbolic legitimacy of values. These spaces offer
203 opportunities for participants to question the assumptions embedded in existing institutions and to critically
204 examine what is taken for granted. By enabling collective reflection and the exchange of alternative
205 viewpoints, they can facilitate the emergence of new shared understandings and value orientations.
206 Importantly, such spaces may also support pilot initiatives, allowing stakeholders to experiment with
207 alternative practices and value systems in practical settings. These experiments can strengthen the legitimacy
208 of alternative values by demonstrating their effectiveness and broadening their social acceptance.

209



210

211 **Figure 3:** Systemic transformative change via shifts in symbolic legitimacy

212 Understanding the recursive and power-mediated nature of value formation is key to analysing both
213 institutional continuity (i.e., the maintenance of the status quo) and the possibilities and barriers to
214 transformative change. Not all values are institutionalised—and not all institutionalised values support
215 sustainability. By foregrounding symbolic power and examining how values are legitimised, marginalised, or
216 contested, we can better understand how to foster SARVs and support more inclusive and transformative
217 forms of governance.

218

219 3. Illustrating the role of symbolic power in the Wagu fisheries in Japan

This section draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted by one of the authors in Wagu, Mie Prefecture, between August 2016 and December 2019, involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews with local fishers and fisheries officers. Key findings from this research have been previously published [12] and are further interpreted here through the lens of symbolic power and value formation.

The case is based on small-scale lobster fisheries, where an institution known as the *pool-sei* (group operation norm) anchors fisheries management in the community. More than a technical rule, the *pool-sei* encodes Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and a historically embedded value system grounded in collective responsibility and intergenerational care. For example, fishers' TEK regarding lobster activity—shaped by observations of water temperature and moon phases—and their desire to act as stewards of the commons are embedded in the *pool-sei* through measures such as reducing fishing pressure when temperatures are high and banning fishing during full moon periods. The relational value of caring for fellow fishers is also reflected in the practice of dividing the proceeds from lobster sales equally, regardless of individual catch volume. This norm not only curtails incentives to "race to the last fish" by ensuring equal income for all, but also functions as a mechanism to provide income stability for elderly fishers who may have lower physical capacity than their younger counterparts.

The stabilising role of symbolic power is evident in how the older generation of fishers, who hold prominent social positions, embody and reproduce the legitimacy of the *pool-sei*. Their authority is not merely a function of age or experience; it is sustained by the widespread perception that the values embedded in the *pool-sei* represent the "natural" and morally appropriate way to manage common resources. Practices such as suspending fishing during full moon periods or redistributing catch income equally are viewed not simply as rules, but as normative expressions of communal ethics. As discussed in Section 3, not all values present within a community are equally institutionalised. In Wagu, some younger fishers have recently begun to articulate alternative values—such as merit-based equity, flexibility, and openness to innovation—that challenge the redistributive ethos of the *pool-sei*. These values, however, lack symbolic legitimacy within the current institutional framework. They remain marginal not because they are irrational or unpopular, but because they fall outside what is perceived as morally justifiable and institutionally acceptable. As a result, younger fishers who question the fairness of the system often hesitate to voice their dissent publicly.

The Wagu case, however, also offers an example of how symbolic legitimacy can shift under specific conditions, as demonstrated by the institutional transformation of fisheries management during the 1990s. As part of this transformation, the number of nets allowed per person was reduced from 13 to 9, fishing during full moon periods was banned, and the *pool-sei* was extended to a three-month period (from October to December)¹. In our view, this transformation was made possible through the formation of a study group, known in Japanese as a *benkyo-kai*, composed of younger fishers and a fisheries extension officer. This

¹ Previously the *pool-sei* or group operation was only implemented couple of day per year before the New Year.

benkyo-kai functioned as a deliberative space, enabling the formation of new SARVs and structured dialogue around the assumptions underpinning existing institutions.

The extension officer introduced new scientific knowledge, particularly stock assessment data, which illuminated the risks of overexploitation and highlighted the need for more adaptive management practices. Drawing on this information, the younger fishers were able to foster SARVs and initiate pilot projects, including a trial reduction in the number of nets per fisher. These experiments demonstrated that catch levels—and therefore income—could be maintained despite reduced effort, thereby challenging the prevailing assumption, held by the older generation, that more gear automatically ensured better livelihoods. In this way, the *benkyo-kai* created a space where emerging SARVs, grounded in scientific evidence, could be collectively discussed and tested. The successful implementation of reduced net use, supported by empirical data, facilitated a shift in symbolic legitimacy that enabled formal institutional change.

Today, however, such spaces for reflection and experimentation are increasingly difficult to establish. As in many rural Japanese communities, the fishing population in Wagu is ageing rapidly, presenting not only practical challenges—such as declining physical capacity and reduced willingness to take risks—but also symbolic ones. Older fishers often hold tightly to established norms and may perceive proposed changes as threats to community cohesion or identity. Without generational turnover or institutional support for sustained intergenerational dialogue, the formation of new *benkyo-kai*-like spaces has become rare. Consequently, younger fishers lack the platforms needed to express their values, test new ideas, and gain the symbolic legitimacy required for transformative change, even when their aspirations align with sustainability.

The Wagu case exemplifies both the durability and the conditional mutability of recursive value systems. It shows how symbolic power stabilises institutional arrangements by naturalising particular value regimes, and how transformation depends on disrupting those symbolic orders while creating spaces where alternative SARVs can gain legitimacy. More broadly, it underscores that value pluralism, though present at the individual level, requires institutional and symbolic scaffolding to translate into collective outcomes. Without such mechanisms, SARVs—no matter how urgently needed—risk remaining fragmented, marginalised, and politically inert.

4. Deliberative spaces and disruptive events as potential catalysts for shifts in symbolic legitimacy

One key question in sustainability science should be about what kinds of institutional arrangements, participatory processes, or governance innovations are needed to support more inclusive value recognition and catalyse the systemic shifts required for sustainability transformations. To try to contribute to answering this question, we have argued that symbolic power plays a foundational role in shaping the dynamics of value formation and institutional change in sustainability governance. By integrating the concept of symbolic power into relational approaches (or relational turn), we have shown how legitimacy is conferred upon certain values

and belief systems while others are excluded, not through coercion, but through processes of recognition that render particular worldviews ‘natural’ or self-evident. We have further argued that value formation highlights how symbolic power mediates the co-evolution of individual values and socially endorsed beliefs, reinforcing normative coherence while simultaneously constraining the imagination of alternative futures and fostering sustainability-aligned relational values (SARVs), which are key for transformative change.

We argue that transformative governance requires more than awareness-raising, behavioural change initiatives, or institutional reforms. It also necessitates shifts in symbolic legitimacy, that is, changes in what is perceived as morally justified, socially appropriate, or politically feasible. To that end, we highlight three points that would need to be considered for transformative governance. First, transformative governance requires sustained, inclusive deliberative platforms, such as citizen assemblies, scenario workshops, and community learning forums, that enable participants to question dominant assumptions, articulate alternative values, and experiment with new practices.

Second, governance should not only pay attention to uncertainty and complexity, as emphasised in reflexive and adaptive governance [47,48], but also go further by institutionalising spaces and mechanisms for critical reflection on the underlying values, worldviews, and symbolic orders that sustain existing institutions. This entails questioning what is taken as socially legitimate, morally acceptable, or politically feasible, rather than merely adjusting tools or targets. Embedding such deep reflexivity into policy processes can help uncover and contest taken-for-granted assumptions, support the emergence of alternative value systems, and open pathways for the symbolic shifts necessary for sustainability transformations. And thirdly, governance needs to be aware not only of the material and procedural dimensions but also of the symbolic structures that confer legitimacy upon particular actors’ value systems. This includes recognising how certain types of knowledge, forms of authority, and norms are framed, validated, and naturalised through cultural coercion. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that even within deliberative spaces, some individuals or groups may remain excluded or unable to express their values and perspectives [49,50]. Addressing such silences is critical to ensuring meaningful pluralism and just governance.

Our analysis is largely theoretical and exploratory, and further comparative research is needed to examine how symbolic power operates across diverse cultural, institutional, and ecological contexts. For instance, Transformation Labs (T-labs) have emerged as promising experimental spaces for transdisciplinary and reflexive governance, offering valuable opportunities to explore how symbolic legitimacy might shift in practice [51–54]. Analysing such initiatives could further illuminate how deliberative spaces support the emergence and institutionalisation of new value systems.

In addition, although we identify deliberative spaces and disruptive events as potential catalysts for shifts in symbolic legitimacy, this process is neither linear nor guaranteed. In some contexts, even major environmental crises do not lead to a shift in the symbolic legitimacy. For example, climate change denial persists even in areas prone to extreme climate-related disasters, illustrating how people often cling to entrenched worldviews

despite contradictory experiences [55]. This suggests that symbolic orders may be deeply resilient, and that symbolic dissonance triggered through e.g. disruptive events may be insufficient for catalysing opportunities for sustainability transformation. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms through which symbolic legitimacy is challenged, negotiated, and reconfigured, including how values gain authority in governance processes and why some alternatives fail to gain traction. A more integrative approach that connects symbolic, political, and ecological dynamics could help explain both the potential and the limits of transformative change.

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