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Manoeuvring, navigating, and transforming policy

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## **Discourse analysis and strategic policy advice: manoeuvring, navigating, and transforming policy**

Kennet Lynggaard (Roskilde University) and Peter Triantafillou (Roskilde University)

**Abstract:** Discourse analysis (DA) has established itself as a widely accepted and legitimate approach to policy analysis. It is used to study issues such as the role of knowledge in policymaking, political cleavages and coalitions, and legitimacy. However, the proponents of DA have generally been reluctant to provide strategic policy advice. This reluctance limits the utility of DA for providing new and partly alternative policy ideas and advice on how to propagate new policies and to consolidate existing ones. This paper aims to extend the scope of DA to include advice that may change or modify how discourses are utilised in shaping policy. It elaborates on seven types of discursive agency allowing policy actors (including politicians, policy strategists, public managers, and citizen groups) to either consolidate existing policy or propagate new policy by *manoeuvring* within a given discursive framework, *navigating* between different and conflicting discourses, or *transforming* existing discourses.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, discursive agency, policy advice, climate emergency, covid-19, labour market policy

### **Introduction**

Contemporary liberal democracies are witnessing complex societal problems that are not easily solved. These problems include, for instance, financial crises, long-term unemployment, pandemics, and global warming. Perhaps more than ever, there is a need not only to analyse and understand policymaking but also to consider the kind of advice we as policy scholars can usefully provide to

policy actors with a view to increasing the likelihood of adopting policies addressing complex societal problems.

Much public policy analysis has analysed how policymakers act in the world of these increasingly complex societal problems. Major strands include agenda-setting studies (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), advocacy coalition studies (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999), and implementation studies (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). In particular, the literature on policy entrepreneurship has provided important insights into how policy brokers and entrepreneurs may shape agenda-setting and policy formulation (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Mintrom & Norman, 2009). For all their merits, these studies have paid limited attention to how discourses frame policy problems and the choice of policy intervention. The kinds of strategic advice provided so far tend to be restricted to timing (agenda-setting), whether to pick insider or outsider strategies (policy entrepreneurship), or how to venture into coalitions seeking policy influence (advocacy coalitions). By implication, there is limited understanding of the role of discourses in shaping policymaking and the room to provide strategic advice on how to move within or even try to modify discourses to push policies.

The discursive framing of real-world problems, arguments over policy goals, and policy solutions are the topic of discourse analysis (DA). The study of discourses, policy frames, belief systems, paradigms, and narratives all draw on discourse analytical concepts, theories, and methodologies that have been widely used to study issues such as the role of knowledge and expertise in policymaking, political cleavages and coalitions, and legitimacy (Hajer, 1995; Howarth & Torfing, 2005; Schmidt, 2008). DA has mainly been engaged in descriptive, explanatory, and critical policy analysis. This has led to novel insights and understandings of the political struggles surrounding policy processes. With important exceptions, DA has generally been reluctant to offer policy advice. This reluctance relates to the insight shared with many other approaches that policymaking is a non-linear, non-rational process, which renders policy advice very difficult. It also relates to DA showing

how the very ideal of the rational process underpinning evidence-based policymaking may exclude other policy solutions that may better ensure minority interests or have democratic credence. Still, even if DA's reluctance to provide policy advice may be well justified, it limits the utility of DA for providing new and partly alternative policy ideas for how to improve policy processes and outputs.

We think that DA should use its commendable analyses of political struggles and how they affect the solution of real-world problems to also engage in strategic policy advice. Important work has already been done in this area. On the basis of the notion of metanarrative, for instance, Emery Roe (1994) exemplifies how conflicting policy preferences may be reconstructed in ways that will break policy deadlocks and produce constructive policy solutions. By interrogating and possibly reframing the problematisation of a social phenomenon, Carol Bacchi's (2009) show how it may be possible to change policy goals and strategies. Her work thus clears a space for discursive agency enabling the provision of strategic advice on how to try to influence policy. We add to this understanding by further elaborating on the concept and analysis of discursive agency, and we illustrate how such agency may lend itself to strategic policy advice. Systematic insight into the prospects of DA offering policy advice is crucial not only for strategic political action and for identifying common (and otherwise) political ground and compromise, it can also potentially transform and enhance the efficiency of policy implementation.

Policy advice is predicated on a certain room for agency on behalf of both the providers and recipients of advice. We must therefore elaborate on how DA deals with agency. In general terms, DA acknowledges the mutually constitutive nature of discursive structure and agency. At the same time, significant variations exist across analytical approaches regarding the emphasis on structure and agency. Studies informed by Laclau/Mouffe, Foucault, and Fairclough tend to lean more to the structural side, whereas Habermas-inspired research is more likely to highlight discursive agency. Viewing the discursive structure–agency nexus as a continuum, the studies of discursive hegemony

may be the most structure-leaning. As we move towards the middle position, we find studies drawing attention to competing discursive coalitions. Agency-leaning studies include a focus on the unintentional and intentional usage of discourse (Lynggaard, 2019, pp. 22–25). We highlight discursive agency and how policy actors intentionally use discourse with a view to offer policy advice from a DA perspective. By implication, we must acknowledge and understand (discursive) agency to supply strategic policy advice on how to operate within or try to modify discourses aimed at pushing policies.

To better understand the political and discursive challenges in tackling real-world problems as well as the room available to policy actors to deal with these challenges, this article proposes and illustrates three general types of discursive agency for propagating new and consolidating existing policy depending on the discursive situation: a) *manoeuvring* within a given discursive framework, b) *navigating* between different and conflicting discourses, and c) *transforming* existing discourses. We specify seven associated types of discursive agency and discuss how policy actors (including politicians, policy strategists, public managers, and citizen groups) may use them, depending on the discursive conditions. Our policy advice then focuses not on substantive ends but on the strategies available for policy actors to influence policy within a particular discursive situation.

The article is organised as follows: Section one outlines the state of the art of discourse and agency. The second section elaborates on three general types of discursive agency for steering policy under different discursive conditions. Section three empirically illustrates the strategic room for shaping policy by providing three examples (from Germany, Denmark, and the EU) of how the various forms of discursive agency are played out in practice and discuss concrete policy advice for steering policy under different discursive conditions. Conclusions are drawn in the fifth and final section.

### **Conceptual framework: discursive agency**

Based on the existing literature on discourse analysis in policy studies, this section outlines the conceptual framework of the article. Inspired above all by Vivien Schmidt and Maarten Hajer, we define discourse and discuss how to address agency within DA.

As regards discursive agency, Schmidt, Hajer, and other discourse theorists argue that agency always takes place within discourses that render certain questions and policy options more obvious than others. Moreover, these discourses are often difficult to change, because the attempts to do so are structured by the very thing they want to change (Hall, 1993; Howarth and Torfing, 2005; Bacchi, 2009). Yet in a vein close to Bacchi's assumption that actors are not only 'in' discourse but may also consciously 'use' it, Schmidt (2010, p. 4) believes that actors have 'foreground discursive abilities' enabling them to explicate, discuss, contest, and possibly change their discursive background. This accentuation of situated agency also underpins Hajer's dramaturgical analysis of discourse, which aims to understand not only 'what people say' but also 'how they say it, where they say it, and (especially) to whom' (Hajer, 2009, p. 65). His analysis focuses on three elements: scripting, staging, and the setting of the 'performances'. From this framework, we draw analytical attention to the actors enunciating the discourse, their audiences, and the political context or setting of the enunciation.

This analytical attention to situated agency is relevant for our purposes of linking discourse analysis to strategic policy advice. Like Hajer, Schmidt's (2008, pp. 312–313) point is that the causal efficacy of a discourse depends not only on its content and consistency but also on the institutional context in which it is articulated and who articulates it. Regarding the latter, we assume that the actions of elected central government politicians are more likely to influence a discourse than most other policy actors, such as policy strategists, public managers, and citizen groups. Therefore, the illustrations used in this paper focus above all on government politicians. While we assume that government politicians are often in a better position to influence discourses than other policy actors,

the illustrations may serve as relevant examples for the other mentioned policy actors seeking advice on how to propagate new policy or to consolidate existing policy.

In a thorough review of the major DA approaches used in policy studies, Leipold and Winkel (2017) define discursive agency as: ‘an actor’s ability to make him/herself a relevant agent in a particular discourse by constantly making choices about whether, where, when, and how to identify with a particular subject position in specific story lines within this discourse’ (p. 524). We use this conception of discursive agency to analyse the strategic options and limitations confronting policymakers seeking to change existing policies. Thus, we regard policy actors as driven by distinct interests and values, which in turn are informed and modified by existing discourses and the institutional context of these discourses (ibid., p. 524). In sum, we assume that policy actors are calculating actors, diligently seeking to exploit existing discourses and sometimes even trying to change them. Yet such calculating acts are at once enabled and often severely constrained by prevailing discourses.

### **Analytical framework: discursive agency for steering policy**

We distinguish between three general types of discursive agency and seven specific ones. The three general types of discursive agency for steering policy are: a) manoeuvring within a given discursive framework; b) navigating between different and conflicting discourses, and c) transforming existing discourses. These general discursive types of agency are based on three distinct discursive conditions. Thus, we use the term ‘manoeuvring’ to designate the calculations and actions taken within an existing (and often hegemonic) discourse with a view to carefully exploiting the resources of that discourse to promote specific policy goals. This general type of discursive agency entails policy changes that do not alter the existing discourse. Navigating implies a more deep-seated change and denotes the difficult movement between and exploitation of two or more distinct discourses to either

counter or promote a particular policy goal. Navigating implies a difficult and potentially dangerous venture, akin to the Odyssean navigation between Scylla and Charybdis, because the policy outcome resulting from engaging two or more distinct and often conflicting discourses is likely to be difficult to control and possibly result in very different solutions than the policy actor intended. Finally, transforming existing discourses is the most demanding form of (general) discursive agency and entails the most substantive form of change; here, policy goals are pursued by attempts to transform existing discourses. That is, compared to the other two discursive situations, transformation is distinct as the strategic goal of the policy actors is indeed dislocation of existing discourses. Furthermore, whereas navigation typically takes place in a situation characterised by conflicting discourses, the level of conflict during transformation is typically lower thus allowing for substantive change. Individual policy actors cannot bring about such transformations easily – they likely depend on relatively rare, catalysing events, such as new scientific understandings of social or natural phenomena (e.g., the (in-)efficacy of school systems, the consequences of global warming) or external shocks to the political system (e.g., fiscal crises, pandemics).

Table 1 below presents the three general types of discursive agency and seven specific ones. The typology is an elaboration of the existing literature, notably Leipold and Winkel (2017) and Schmidt (2008).

**Table 1.** Discursive agency for steering policy

<b>General discursive agency</b>	<b>Discourse manoeuvring</b>	<b>Discourse navigation</b>	<b>Discourse transformation</b>
<b>Discursive conditions</b>	One hegemonic discourse	Two or more (conflicting) discourses	One or more discourses



<b>Specific discursive agency</b>	<i>Normative power:</i> propagating policy change or stability by strict reference to the normative power of existing hegemonic discourse  <i>Manipulation:</i> consolidating existing policy by pretending paradigm change	<i>Exclusion:</i> arguing that one discourse is more legitimate than another  <i>Multiple functionality:</i> arguing that a policy must accommodate legitimate (but conflicting) discourses  <i>Vagueness:</i> propagating a policy change by general and vague articulations of discourse(s) downplaying discursive conflicts	<i>Rationalism:</i> Invoke novel scientific ideas and findings to challenge and reform an existing policy and discourse  <i>Securitisation:</i> propagating policy change based on another discourse than the hitherto hegemonic one to address a threat to polity survival
<b>Discursive outcome</b>	Reproduction	Mutation	Displacement

Manoeuvring within a given hegemonic discourse is a common discursive situation of which policy actors should be ready to take charge. Manoeuvring may entail discursive agency through normative power or manipulation. Both forms of discursive agency seek to retain and exploit the options of the existing hegemonic discourse. *Normative power* propagates policy change or consolidates existing policy by strict reference to the normative power of the existing hegemonic discourse (see Schmidt, 2008, p. 312; Leipold & Winkel, 2017). Normative ideas embedded in a hegemonic discourse supply powerful arguments for actors to legitimise policy initiatives that may bring about substantial societal changes (Campbell, 2004, pp. 127ff.). Discursive agency by means of *manipulation* involves consolidating existing policy trajectory by launching superficial policy changes as a substantial or even paradigmatic shift. Examples include governments framing policy initiatives as essential for a

‘green transition’ of societies even while policies remain the same or are possibly repackaged to suggest major reform and increased funding. The discursive outcome is a reproduction of the existing discourse, which, given its hegemonic nature, is highly resistant and rarely subject to change.

Navigating between discourses in turn highlights discursive agency aimed at steering policy by means of exclusion, multiple functionality, and vagueness. Discursive agency by means of *exclusion* involves ‘taking sides’ by articulating one discourse as more legitimate than another. *Multiple functionality* involves arguing that a policy embedded in a less-than-legitimate discourse must accommodate to a conflicting but legitimated discourse (Schmidt, 2008, p. 312). The third available discursive agency for navigating between conflicting discourses is *vagueness*, which works by claiming that there is no contradiction between the discourses informing the policy at hand. Vagueness involves propagating a policy change by referring to discourse(s) in very general and vague terms. The use of the ever popular ‘sustainability discourse’ offers a case in point. Sustainability was first used primarily to denote policies supporting the long-term, balanced use of natural resources and environmental protection, while subsequently also becoming an umbrella term for policies aiming at balancing social and economic developments, and even referring to balanced public finances and sound fiscal policies. The discursive outcome is discursive mutation, as two or more conflicting discourses are brought together to produce a new mix of ideas different from the original discourses, which were alternatives to one another (Lynggaard, 2019, pp. 71–74).

Finally, discourse transformation may take place through rationalism and securitisation. Both forms of discursive agency seek to radically change policies by changing the existing discourses. Discursive transformation differs from the two other general forms of discursive agency by being predicated on rare events or circumstances. Such rare events may include the emergence of a new and radically different scientific consensus on how to understand a particular social or natural phenomenon; or perhaps the widespread perception that society is in a crisis that may (not) challenge

existing discursive understandings of what the problem is and how it is best solved. *Rationalism* involves the use of novel scientific understandings of social or natural phenomena aimed at challenging and reforming an existing discourse (Leipold & Winkel, 2017). For instance, a government may want to radically alter energy policies and move towards renewable energy sources based on global warming research. Discursive agency by means of *securitisation* involves propagating policy change based on another discourse than the hitherto hegemonic one by framing a social phenomenon as a threat to polity survival. Here, we are alluding to the key idea developed by the Copenhagen School of Securitization (Buzan *et al.*, 1998) without strictly applying their analytical scheme. The discursive outcome of discursive transformation is a radical displacement, amounting to a change of path (Pierson, 2000) and third-order policy change (Hall, 1993). Accordingly, it is the rarest form of change and creates space for new ideas, agency, and ways of conducting politics.

How policy actors decide on which of the seven specific types of discursive agency to engage in to influence policy depends on the discursive situation. Advising on which type of agency to adopt may also depend on other circumstances, such as the policy actor's access to financial resources, expertise, and their ability to engage in coalitions with other actors (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). Here, however, we focus on the discursive situation. We assume that the seven specific types of discursive agency may be discretely placed within each of the three general categories. That is, based on the literature and our logical reasoning about what constitutes the most effective way for the policy actor to influence a policy direction within a certain discursive situation, we assume that normative power and manipulation are most effective under condition of one hegemonic discourse, exclusion; multiple functionality and vagueness are most effective under conditions of two conflicting discourses; and that rationalism and securitisation are most effective when attempting to change a discourse. In political practice, however, they may be overlapping. Rationalism, for instance, could be (and no doubt is) being used as a strategy not only to try to change a discourse but also to

manoeuvre within a given one. However, as the development of new scientific understandings of social or natural phenomenon is unpredictable and far apart, appealing to the normative power of the existing discourse or to manipulate appear to be much more effective strategies within the context of an accepted/given discourse. A final qualification: On the one hand, we consider the three discursive conditions and the seven associated types of discursive agency as analytically distinct. They represent situations that policy advisors are most commonly facing. On the other hand, reality is always more complicated, and we are likely to find a somewhat gradual transition from one discursive situation to another. Accordingly, policy advisors may occasionally opt to draw on discursive agency strategies associated with not only one but two discursive situations.

We have chosen three examples from Germany, Denmark, and the EU to illustrate our conceptual and analytical categories on discursive agency. The examples are not chosen according to a comparative logic nor to satisfy any ambition of empirical generalisation; instead, they should illustrate as many of the seven types of discursive agency as possible. We managed to find six of the seven types. Vagueness is not illustrated empirically in the following. The three examples are described via official policy documents and legislation, together with how they are propagated via government press statements and criticised in national newspapers by opposition parties. Given the limited space here, we can only provide few illustrations of multiple ways in which policy actors actually exploited and contested the discourses. Our coding of these documents to identify the six types of discursive agency is explained in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Coding of discursive agency

<i>Discursive agency</i>	<i>Code</i>
Normative power	Arguments propagating policy change or policy stability that seek to gain normative power or legitimacy by referring explicitly to an existing hegemonic discourse

Manipulation	Consolidating existing policy by pretending paradigm change. No/limited change of policy that nonetheless is articulated as fundamental or even paradigmatic policy changes
Exclusion	Explicit arguments in favour of policies that are justified by reference to one discourse. Other discourses are explicitly or implicitly disfavoured
Multiple functionality	A policy is explicitly argued to be able to accommodate two or more discourses that conflict on either their problem definition or their basic moral values (e.g., collective wellbeing vs. individual freedom)
Rationalism	Invoke novel scientific ideas and findings to challenge and reform an existing policy and discourse
Securitisation	Propagating policy change based on another discourse than the hitherto hegemonic one to address an existential threat, including arguing the necessity of extraordinary measures to ensure polity survival and even human subsistence

## Analysis

This section analyses three examples of policy change to illustrate the role that discourses played in enabling particular forms of discursive agency. In each example, firstly, we identify the discursive conditions and institutional context of the policy reform. By discursive condition, we distinguish between situations with only one hegemonic discourse, two more or less equally strong ones, or where the policy actor intends to change the discourse(s) – regardless of the number of discourses. By institutional context (Schmidt, 2008, p. 312), we refer to general polity features (EU vs. nation state, consensus vs. majoritarian polity) and to the parliamentary situation (minority vs. majority government, stable vs. unstable government). Secondly, we illustrate the associated discursive agency based on the seven types developed above. Thirdly, we identify the discursive outcome by accounting for whether and how the discourses engaged by the policy actors were modified.

***Manoeuvring within a discourse: neoliberal German employment policies***

This section analyses the German labour market reforms from the early 2000s and the recent reform proposals introduced by the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) in 2021 prior to the autumn election. Both reforms, we argue, draw heavily on a single discourse, neoliberalism, which favours labour market policies purporting to enhance the international competitiveness of industry and employers alike. We also illustrate how the two reforms exploit neoliberal discourses quite differently: While the reforms of the early 2000s utilised the normative power of neoliberalism to legitimise rather radical policy changes, the 2021 reform proposals were justified via manipulation. Table 3 below summarises the analysis.

**Table 3.** Manoeuvring within a discourse: neoliberal German employment policies

<b>General discursive agency</b>	<b>Discourse manoeuvring</b>
<b>Discursive conditions</b>	One hegemonic (German-style) neoliberal discourse favouring labour market policies purporting to enhance international competitiveness of industry and employees alike
<b>Specific discursive agency</b>	<i>Normative power</i> is exercised by the SPD, including Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder, and by the majority of the Red–Green coalition in the 2000s. Both propagated labour market policy change with reference to the longstanding neoliberal discourse that was hegemonic not only in Germany, but also in successful neighbouring countries Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands <i>Manipulation</i> is exercised by the SPD, but also by the coalition government partners FDP and Green Party in 2021. They announced reforms as a paradigm change, while policies largely follow the existing neoliberal path

<b>Discursive outcome</b>	Reproduction of German neoliberal (labour market) discourse
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The overall aim of the German employment reforms implemented in the early 2000s – often called the Hartz reforms after Volkswagen HR Director Peter Hartz, who led a commission on labour market reform – aimed to reduce German unemployment (Kommission, 2002). They included four laws, Hartz I–IV, which were gradually implemented between 2003 and 2005. The laws contain a comprehensive set of specific policy measures that entailed: improved employment services, stricter conditions for unemployment benefits, and labour market deregulation (making it easier for employers to fire workers).

Discursive conditions and institutional context: In 2002, the Hartz reforms were inaugurated following a scandal involving the federal employment office (Jacobi & Kluge, 2006, p. 8). This scandal may well have been a triggering event that policymakers exploited to overcome reform resistance (Jacobi & Kluge, 2006, p. 4). However, the reform was preceded by a deep-seated discursive change whereby the labour market problem was no longer primarily seen as a question of compensation in case of unemployment, but rather as a question of competitiveness (Jessop, 1993).

This discursive emphasis on state competitiveness was anything but novel to Germany. As early as the 1930s, a group of scholars attached to the journal *Ordo* started to formulate novel economic and judicial ideas about the proper role of the state (Foucault, 2008, pp. 101–157). Unlike the neoliberal discourses emanating from the United States, the German neoliberal discourses envisage a strong role for the state in ensuring market functioning and competitiveness. These discourses fundamentally informed the post-WWII West German social market policies. Still, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Germany adopted numerous social and workplace insurance schemes aimed less at

ensuring West German economic competitiveness and more at securing the economic livelihood of workers in times of unemployment. Thus, it is only from the 1980s that neoliberal discourses attain the hegemonic status necessary to effectively change social and workplace insurance schemes and policies.

Discursive agency 1: The normative power of the neoliberal discourses crucially informed Agenda 2010, a comprehensive set of policies for reforming the German labour market and social welfare system launched in the early 2000s (Hüther & Scharnagel, 2005). The Agenda 2010 reform paper started by striking a tone of disaster and repeatedly hammered out how Germany is falling behind Europe with falling growth and high unemployment levels. The key causes behind this malady were identified as ‘High taxes and levies, crippling bureaucracy and still high labour costs’ (Hüther & Scharnagel, 2005). Gerhard Schröder announced that the thrust of the solution to the unemployment problem was to ‘cut state benefits, promote personal responsibility and demand more personal contribution from each individual’ (Schröder, 2003, cited in Hüther & Scharnagel, 2005). The reform was anything but popular. Even fellow SPD members voted against it. Still, the Red–Green coalition managed to find sufficient parliamentary support for the reforms. As they were rolled out beginning in 2003, public dissatisfaction with the coalition government in general and Gerhard Schröder in particular grew significantly, to the point where the latter had to resign in 2004 (Centre for Public Impact, 2019). Despite criticism from the political opposition and many trade unions, the planned legislative changes were all implemented.

Discursive outcome 1: The policy outcome of the 2004 Hartz reform constituted a fundamental break with earlier labour market policies emphasising compensation (benefits), and it saw unemployment as resulting from insufficient demand for labour. The policy changes radically reformed the existing unemployment insurance criteria and schemes. At the discursive level,



however, the outcome was more a consolidation of the German-style neoliberal discourses that had been articulated in (West) Germany since the 1930s than a radical change.

Discursive agency 2: If the SPD was able to bring about rather substantive policy changes in the mid-2000s by exploiting the normative power of neoliberal discourses, manipulation was the preferred discursive agency it adopted when pushing their 2021 reform. Thus, SPD linked its new employment policy to the wider ‘paradigmatic shift’ invoked by the EU COVID-19 recovery programme (SPD, 2021, p. 45). In late 2021, the new German government coalition (SPD, FDP and the Green Party) announced several labour market policies that they claimed to represent a fundamental break with the Hartz IV unemployment benefits scheme (Koalitionsvertrag, 2021). The coalition used manipulation by claiming three policy changes to be path-breaking. Firstly, under great public attention, they claimed to introduce universal basic income (UBI) for the first time in Germany; that is, a basic level of social transfer available to all citizens who are unable to provide for themselves. A leading SPD member of the Bundestag, Kathrin Michel, explained:

Overall, the universal basic income represents a *comprehensive paradigm shift*. Those who need support will get it: Targeted, unbureaucratic, digital, and without finger-pointing (Michel, 2022, our emphasis).

However, the government coalition’s version of UBI is not designed as a universal right for all citizens; rather, it is a very modest change that will reduce administrative barriers for active jobseekers to access social benefits (Hanesch, 2022). Secondly, the reform proposal highlights continued education as a crucial instrument to spur economic modernisation and digitisation (Koalitionsvertrag, 2021). While this scheme may be important for enhancing the skills of certain worker groups, it not only consolidates the 2019 Skills Strategy adopted by the previous conservative government (Cournoyer, 2020), it also borrows heavily from neoliberal discourses on human capital ideas (Peters, 2016). A third policy reform is to extend the scope and level of the minimum salary (Koalitionsvertrag, p. 55). On the face of it, this proposal seems to directly contradict the neoliberal

doxa of letting wages follow demand and supply. Yet the current proposal is a meek one that seeks to extend the result of existing collective agreements to areas that are uncovered thus far (Pladson, 2020).

Discursive outcome 2: The SPD and the coalition government in which it participates produced at least three employment policy changes since 2021, changes that have been heralded as substantially different from the Hartz IV and the ensuing Conservative government policies. While the policy changes were announced as paradigmatic change, they seemed to consolidate and reproduce neoliberal discourses on the economy and employment. Thus, the claims to novelty and even paradigmatic change have more to do with drumming up electoral support (what we term manipulation) than with contesting the prevailing neoliberal discourse.

Against this backdrop and in terms of policy advice, when policy actors are facing a situation with a very strong (hegemonic) discourse informing existing policies, they may consider adopting normative power to legitimise policy change. This is a frequently occurring discursive situation of which policy actors should be ready to take charge. For several decades, we have seen neoliberal discourses serve as a strong normative force underpinning substantial policy changes in areas such as employment services, public health, schooling, and crime prevention. While neoliberal discourses are increasingly challenged by other discourses following the financial crisis and the pandemic, it remains a powerful discourse. Yet following three decades of reforms, it seems increasingly difficult to utilise the normative power of neoliberalism to justify significant policy change. Instead, in most liberal democracies, the normative power of neoliberalism is more likely to be able to work as a strategy for avoiding substantive change by portraying incremental policy evolution as a paradigmatic (discursive) shift. While this may be an effective strategy, as testified in the German coalition government's promotion of UBI, it is also politically dangerous, as the policy actors risk accusations of just that: manipulation.

### *Navigating between discourses: Danish government between epidemiological and liberal freedom discourses*

The first Danish citizen tested positive for COVID-19 in late February 2020, after which the virus spread rapidly. On this background, a series of political interventions was launched beginning in March to curb the spread of the virus and, later, to mitigate the economic repercussions of the pandemic. The interventions sparked political debate, both those seeking to curb the spread of the virus, such as travel restrictions, workplace closures, mask wearing and vaccination (Triantafillou, 2022), and the interventions seeking to mitigate the economic repercussions, such as economic subsidies to workplaces allowing them to retain employees. While this debate and the popular divides over these interventions were less polarised in Denmark than in many other countries, there was a pronounced conflict between epidemiological discourses seeking to protect human life and liberal discourses seeking to protect the freedom of citizens to assemble, conduct their business, travel, not wear masks, etc. (Triantafillou, 2022).

From spring 2020 to spring 2022, the Social Democratic minority government navigated between the epidemiological discourses encouraging the protection of life and wellbeing of the population and the liberal discourses ensuring individual freedoms. This navigation was further complicated by the government's minority status. The Social Democrats had assurances of parliamentary support from three left-leaning parties at the inception of their office. Still, they could not take this support for granted in the highly extraordinary challenges resulting from the pandemic. The epidemiological discourses proved highly influential in shaping the preferred policy choices. With few important exceptions, the Social Democratic governing policies seeking to curb the pandemic via a set of policies restricting individual freedoms were, at the time, widely accepted by

parties across the political spectrum. The most important policies were: A four-month closure of Danish borders in spring 2020 for anyone without a legitimate purpose and introduction of quarantine recommendations (Statsministeriet, 2020); temporary closure of all childcare institutions, primary and secondary schools, and post-secondary institutions; enhanced legal powers providing the public authorities additional means for handling epidemic diseases and, if necessary by use of the police, to close institutions and businesses, and disallow the assembly of more than 10 people (Sundheds- og Ældreministeriet, 2020); and economic support programmes for Danish companies (Dansk Industri, 2021). Table 4 summarises the analysis below.

**Table 4.** Navigating between discourses: Danish government between epidemiological and liberal freedoms discourses

<b>General discursive agency</b>	<b>Discourse navigation</b>
<b>Discursive conditions</b>	Two conflicting discourses: one epidemiological, encouraging the protection of life and wellbeing of the population, and one liberal, ensuring individual freedoms
<b>Specific discursive agency</b>	Exclusion of liberal discourses and individual freedoms justified by the Social Democratic government in terms of epidemiological discourses and concerns over the health and wellbeing of the population.  Multiple functionality via the introduction of massive testing and the corona passport; the government adopts policy seeking to accommodate both of the conflicting discourses.  Vagueness: Not applied systematically in this example
<b>Discursive outcome</b>	Mutation of liberal discourses regarding both the concern for individual freedoms and the self-governing capacities of markets.

Discursive conditions and institutional context: Denmark is renowned for the strength of its welfare state ideals, purporting to ensure the wealth and well-being of all its citizens via generous social transfers and tax-financed education and public health systems. On the one hand, Danish political parties are all acutely aware of how pursuing a programme openly seeking to erode the welfare state is a political no-go. Thus, even the most liberal and market-friendly party, the Liberal Alliance, has pledged to support the tax-financed public health system. Conversely, Danish politics is also characterised by an anathema to superfluous public expenditures, and the populace displays a profound scepticism of unjustified political interventions in private lives. Finally, it should be noted that Denmark has lengthy traditions for consensus-oriented minority governments that are forced to negotiate and adopt compromises between the (minority) government and one or more opposition parties. With important exceptions, such as the handling of the COVID-19 virus, this consensus-style policy tends to make it difficult to adopt swift and radical policy reforms (Krogh et al., 2022).

Discursive agency: In the following, we illustrate exclusion and multiple functionality. Our example does not allow for illustrating the vagueness; while vagueness was exercised in a few instances where the government tried to gloss over the contradictions between these two discourses, it mostly acknowledged in rather explicit terms that the policies were a trade-off between the two. Exclusion entails side-taking, arguing that one discourse is more legitimate than another. The coordination unit in the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Health, and the Danish Health Authority, which were the key policy actors throughout the pandemic, explicitly justified the policies seeking to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus and protecting public health. The arguments for new interventions and restrictions were resorting to epidemiological knowledge and discourses visualising, analysing, and predicting the spread of the virus under various policy scenarios. These epidemiological arguments for restricting longstanding liberal rights, such as freedom of assembly, free physical movement, and the right to conduct business, were mostly accepted by the opposition

and the public. Yet there was a crucial exception to this acceptance: In November 2020, the Prime Minister's coordination unit ostentatiously pressured the head of the SSI, a supposedly politically independent inoculation and epidemiological health institute, to exaggerate the epidemiological evidence in favour of shutting down the entire Danish mink industry. As Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen explained at a press meeting:

A mutated virus risks spreading from Denmark to other countries. We must therefore take the situation on Danish mink farms extremely seriously. As a government, we will do everything we can to ensure that the mutated infection is contained and spreads no further. This requires resolute action. First, it is necessary to cull all mink in Denmark. Unfortunately, this also applies to breeding animals. The assessment of the National Serum Institute is clear: continuing to farm mink during the current epidemic poses a significant risk to public health, including the ability to prevent COVID-19 with vaccines (Frederiksen, 2020, our translation).

Again, this exceptional use of force, which proved unconstitutional, hinged on the exclusion of liberal discourses and norms, an exclusion justified solely by employing epidemiological discourses.

Multiple functionality entails that actors argue that a policy must accommodate legitimate but conflicting discourses. Whereas the first half year or so of the pandemic was characterised by the exclusion of liberal discourses, the development of mass testing and the digital corona passport enabled the government to try to engage in multiple functionality agency. The corona passport was an online app developed by the Danish Digitization Agency in autumn 2020 to allow citizens to enter workplaces and all public spaces. The passport would give a green light on the condition that the citizen had been recently tested, had recently recovered from COVID-19, or they had been vaccinated. On the basis of epidemiological data, the government argued that the corona passport helped to keep the infection rate at an acceptable, low rate and that it ensured individual freedom to travel and access workplaces and public facilities (Heunicke, 2021). This argument and, thus, the multiple functionality

strategy, were successful. The opposition parties, trade unions, employers, and most of the public all accepted the government policy, dissent coming only from certain anti-vaccination groups and a citizens group concerned with excessive government surveillance (Cordes, 2021).

Discursive outcome: The extraordinary policy interventions, which restricted individual freedoms to protect life and distorted markets by distributing generous economic compensations to many (but not all) companies, all enjoyed broad majority support in parliament. Concerns over individual freedoms and the scepticism of intervening directly in the market thus seem to have been largely overruled by epidemiological worries over public health and the survival of Danish workplaces. The economic compensation policies resulted in gross transgressions of the public budget rules imposed for decades by the Ministry of Finance (Finansministeriet, 2020); rules that had been reinforced rather than relaxed following the 2008 financial crisis. However, if liberal discourses were effectively side-lined in spring 2020, they were reinstated less than two years later when the pandemic policy restrictions were almost all abandoned.

Against this backdrop and in terms of policy advice, in the situation of two or more influential and co-existing discourses informing the policy area, policy actors may consider engaging in one or more of three types of discursive agency. Firstly, policy actors could adopt exclusion by arguing that one discourse is more legitimate than another. In most circumstances, this is a very difficult strategy to pursue, because both discourses are widely regarded as legitimate. However, in a crisis situation as in the case of the Danish pandemic, it may be possible, at least for a period, to argue that one discourse must prevail over the other. If successful, this may enable rather substantive policy changes. Secondly, policy actors could adopt multiple functionality by maintaining that a policy must accommodate legitimate but conflicting discourses. This strategy is the bread-and-butter of everyday political compromises and well known to all policy actors. It is therefore an easy strategy to adopt.

Yet the downside of the strategy of making a policy accommodate two conflicting discourses is that policy control becomes very difficult. At any point, other policy actors could contest how a policy is balancing the two discourses. Finally, policy actors may try to propagate policy change by general and vague articulations of discourse(s) with a view to downplaying discursive conflicts. For instance, in case of competing economic and environmental discourses on agricultural production, policy actors may mobilise the vague but immanently positive term ‘sustainable production’. In so doing, policy actors may be relatively precise about how agricultural policies will ensure export earnings and workplaces and at the same either gloss over environmental sustainability concerns or hint at rather vague prospects of technological innovation that will reduce the environmental impact of agricultural production.

### ***Transforming a discourse: European Parliament declaring climate and environmental emergency***

On 28 November 2019, the EP adopted a resolution declaring a ‘climate and environmental emergency’ (European Parliament, 2019). This declaration of a climate emergency could be used as a way to transform existing discourses with potentially radical effects on national and EU policies. Prior to the EP declaration, parliaments in the UK, Ireland (both May 2019), Portugal (June 2019), Spain, France, Austria, and Malta (all September 2019) had all declared climate change to be a matter of emergency (Climate Emergency Declaration, 2022). However, with the EP declaration, all of the 28 EU member states were committed to climate policies defining climate change as an emergency situation. Although we have yet to see the full implications of the discursive transformation, the EU institutions and several member states have already adopted and justified climate policies as an emergency matter. The climate emergency declaration has established a discursive platform for policy actors – governments, NGOs, and others – to push for the adoption of extraordinary measures addressing climate change and challenging insufficient policy initiatives. Perhaps just as importantly,



at least in the short- to medium term, it is no longer possible to legitimise major EU political reforms – as well as in many EU member states – only in terms of economic growth. Table 5 summarises the analysis below.

**Table 5.** Transforming a discourse: European Parliament declaring climate and environmental emergency

<b>General discursive agency</b>	<b>Discourse transformation</b>
<b>Discursive conditions</b>	Two discourses: The ‘ecological modernisation’ discourse placing environmental protection on par with economic growth. And another discourse, weaker but important among environmentalists, holding that environmental protection is the non-reducible societal ideal that should be the basis of all political activity.
<b>Specific discursive agency</b>	Rationalism was exercised, especially by Renew Europe but also by the vast majority of the EP parliamentarians, by repeatedly highlighting the indisputable scientific evidence of man-made climate change and that immediate action must be taken for such changes not to spiral out of control and contributing further to global warming.  Securitisation was exercised by groups within the EP and MEPs and a clear EP majority. Policy actors argued that climate change constitutes an existential threat, and far-reaching EU policy reforms are needed.
<b>Discursive outcome</b>	Climate change discourse is displaced from being a crisis to a matter of emergency.

Discursive conditions and institutional context: ‘Climate emergency’ was announced as the ‘Oxford Word of the Year’ in 2019. Word of the Year is a manifestation of ‘a word or expression shown

through usage evidence to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the passing year, and have lasting potential as a term of cultural significance' (Oxford University Press, 2019). The declarations of climate emergency build on environmental discourses dating back to the early 1970s, with the widely publicised book, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, being a key discursive trigger (Lynggaard, 2006). Since the mid-1980s, 'ecological modernisation' (Hajer, 1995) and 'sustainability' (Baker, 2007) have served as a discursive framework shaping 'green politics' in the EU, just like the EU self-identifies as a global climate policy leader.

Since the early 1970s, environmental politics has been framed by two key competing discourses characterised by an unequal balancing of growth and environmental protection. The predominant discourse – often labelled 'ecological modernisation' – regards environmental protection on par with economic growth. Here, the development of new technologies and innovation may simultaneously protect the environment and spur economic development. The other discourse asserts that public policies be designed for environmental protection. Only by securing environmentally sustainable production is it possible to secure long-term economic development. Against this backdrop, governmental 'Climate Emergency Declarations' were first adopted in the mid-2010s by local Australian authorities: Local and national governments in Europe started adopting similar declarations in early 2019, culminating with an EP resolution declaring a 'Climate and environmental emergency' in late 2019. Even if some EPP (European People's Party) MEPs ended up voting against the declaration and the Greens initially opposed it, the EP declaration was adopted with the support of a large cross-party majority (429 in favour, 225 against, 19 abstentions) (Euractiv, 2019). While EP politics has long reflected consensus and compromises within the 'grand coalition' comprised by the EPP and S&D (Socialists & Democrats), the EP has become more diverse in recent years. In particular, Renew Europe and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) have played

important roles in the building of a majority coalition pushing environmental policies after the 2019 EP election.

Discursive agency: The EP and groupings within the EP exercised discursive agency in the form of rationalisation, more so through securitisation, but the two often go hand-in-hand when pushing the discourse highlighting climate emergency. The EP used rationalisation by repeatedly stressing the indisputable scientific evidence of man-made climate change and that immediate action is necessary to avoid such changes spiralling out of control and keeping global warming within 1.5 degrees Celsius. The EP pointed in particular to evidence from the UN and the intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Within the EP, Renew Europe initiated and was especially keen to push the adoption of the ‘climate emergency’ resolution, including the use of rationalisation. As stated by Renew MEP Pascal Canfin (chair of the EP Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee):

What we need to do, therefore, is to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions in 2030 by 55% compared to 1990. *This is what science asks us to do, this isn't what emotion tells us. It's not what irrationality would ask or require of us. It's what scientists ask us to do.* And I think as politicians on the left, right or centre, we must listen to this scientific message (European Parliament, 2019a, own translation and emphasis)

Similar arguments are made by MEPs Pär Holmgren (Greens/EFA), Véronique Trillet-Lenoir (Renew), and Manuel Bompard (GUE/NGL). Moreover, the EP securitised climate change and associated policies as a matter of emergency. The EP argued that climate change constitutes an existential threat and that far-reaching EU policy reforms are needed. EP and MEP groupings argued, with varying degree of pathos, the urgent need for political action to ensure the ‘survival of the human species’ (Pär Holmgren, Greens/EFA), that ‘[e]ither we change and adapt or we simply disappear’ (César Luena, S&D), metaphorically claiming ‘our house is on fire’ (Jytte Guteland, S&D).

The discursive transformation towards ‘climate emergency’ has been advocated by local governments, NGOs, Green Parties, climate activists, and, in particular, youth activists around the

world. The EP, then, was by no means alone in pushing for what was a rather swift transformation. Still, the EP played a key role in bringing the discourse into the centre of EU politics. This was done through discursive agency, using rationalisation and securitisation.

Discursive outcome: While climate change has been labelled a crisis, especially around the mid-2000s, climate emergency is a much more recent phenomenon, arguably amounting to a discursive dislocation. Declaring climate change to be a matter of emergency because it may involve immediate government actions that short-circuit ordinary democratic and legal processes (McHugh *et al.*, 2021, pp. 6–9). The EP declaration, however, explicitly stated that extraordinary measures must be employed to combat climate change while respecting existing EU decision-making practices. Clearly, the level of support of climate emergency discourse varies greatly across different types of actors, areas of politics as well as among EU member states, just like we have only just begun to see the policy implications of the discursive change. However, within the EP and by extension within EU politics, climate emergency discourse is now at the centre stage.

Against this backdrop and in terms of policy advice, in this third situation where policy change seems very difficult if not outright impossible within the existing discourses, the policy actors may consider trying to challenge and modify them. On the one hand, this is a very difficult strategy to pursue, as success often depends either on the development of new scientific consensus or the emergence of what is widely perceived as a national crisis. On the other hand, liberal democracies have seen an expanded role for policy communication advice, not least with the advent of social media from around 2010. Spin doctors, public relations managers, and communication and media experts play an increasingly important role, not only for executive governments but also for larger interest organisations seeking to influence policymaking. For better or for worse, these kinds of policy actors may be better able to modify wider discourses than traditional civil servants focusing on legal and objective matters. Policy actors adopting the discourse transformation strategy may try the

rationalist path by invoking science to challenge and reform the existing discourse. This may be achieved by promoting already existing scientific findings and possibly highlighting the authority of the research institutions and researchers involved. It may also be done by commissioning and financing new research or policy reports tailored for the purpose. Regardless, it is difficult to push wider discursive change through and, with it, fundamental policy changes by claims to scientific expertise only.

Policy actors seeking to bring about discursive change may, finally, resort to securitisation by framing the need for policy change as a matter of ensuring the very survival of society. This can be done by dramatising the scope and urgency of a threat, including the use of emotional appeals and disconcerting images. At the same time, policy actors must highlight the necessity of dealing with the issue at hand, allowing for the adoption of extraordinary measures. Yet not all policy issues easily lend themselves to being framed in terms of polity survival in a convincing manner. Overdoing this may risk policy actors appearing unreliable, and their policy proposals may be rejected on those grounds. As the work of the Copenhagen School has suggested, however, there is a space beyond classical questions of territorial integrity and sovereignty to securitise social issues, such as the environment, pandemics, and economic competitiveness.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has identified three general types of discursive agency allowing policy actors to propagate new and consolidate existing policy by *manoeuvring* within a given discursive framework, *navigating* between different and conflicting discourses, or *transforming* existing discourses. More precisely, we illuminated seven types of discursive agency that may be useful for policy actors to adopt, depending on the discursive situation: normative power, manipulation, exclusion, multiple functionality, vagueness, rationalism, and securitisation.

In academic terms, our article assumes that DA is a strong tool for critically scrutinising policy frames, belief systems, paradigms, and narratives. We also believe that a need remains for strong descriptive, causal, and critical policy analysis. Yet our paper has tried to advance the research agenda of discourse analysis by adding the development of seven types of discursive agency that policy actors may use to propagate new policies or consolidate existing ones. Any qualified attempt at utilising discursive agency to steer policy processes must, in our view, be based on the descriptive, causal, and critical analysis of discourses. Hence, while critical analysis and strategic advice may at times be at odds, we find that they may also work together productively.

In more practical terms, we may draw some general implications for policy actors. At the most general level, policy actors may improve their strategic actions by recognising that the likelihood of influence hinges not only on pecuniary resources, expertise, and coalitions with influential policymakers. Influence also depends on being able to manoeuvre within, navigate between, and even transform discourses. On the basis of our study, our advice is that policy actors consider employing either normative power or manipulation under condition of one hegemonic discourse; that they consider exclusion, multiple functionality or vagueness under conditions of two conflicting discourses. Finally, if the goal is to transform a discourse, we suggest that policy actors adopt rationalism or securitisation. This is not to say that other strategies may not be useful, but the literature – and our illustrative examples – suggest that our suggestions are viable avenues for policy influence. Experienced policy actors with in-depth understanding of the discursive field within which they operate may act more intuitively in their attempt to propagate a policy. Yet they may also draw lessons for more systematic planning of the usage of different discursive-agency types in unlike institutional contexts, and under different discursive conditions. Less experienced policy actors may need explicit and systematic analysis of extant discourse(s) and the potentials and limits they set for policy strategies. Future research in the area may benefit from studying the limits and opportunities for

discursive agency among different types of policy actors with uneven decision-making authority. Finally, while this paper has drawn empirical illustrations from different national contexts (Germany and Denmark) and the EU, future research could benefit from digging deeper into possible variations between the limits and options for discursive agency in different polities.

Some normative reflections on the provision of strategic policy advice may be in place. Obviously, a wide range of policy actors can use our advice (e.g., politicians, policy strategists, public managers, citizens groups) for a wide range of purposes. We may or may not like these purposes; for instance, many who are concerned with climate change and the need for radical policy change to combat it would be unhappy with politicians or industry groups using manipulation to propagate stability in this area. It may also be disconcerting if a politician is trying to securitise an issue like immigration in terms of national security with a view to evicting or persecuting immigrants. There is no way we can hinder policy actors to pursue such goals by way of these types of discursive agency. In fact, there are several examples of this being done already. Thus, rather than abstaining from engaging in policy advice, we think it makes sense for all policy actors to have an awareness of the various forms of discursive agency, both in cases where they want to use them for what many would think are benevolent purposes and in cases where other policy actors may try to push less benevolent policies. In the latter situation, awareness of the opponent's strategic choice of discursive agency may prove useful for hindering undesirable policies.

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