

In the Making

Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation (PFST):

Theoretical Reflections for Action Research in Brazil Towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

This essay presents the theoretical foundations for an action research project on Brazilian leaders and their perceptions and actions on sustainable development. Although we focus on Brazil, the issues we explore encompass a broad agenda on the politics of international development and our model can travel to other parts of the globe. Our goal is to present a critique of the theoretical frameworks that underpins the current UN 2030 Agenda by embracing awareness-based system change (ABSC) theories. We develop our own approach—psychopolitical foresensing for social transformation (PFST)—to refer to the interconnection between individual and collective wellbeing that occurs when high leaders from profit, non-profit and government organizations are willing to apply their financial, political and social resources to commit to real change in the direction

of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The essay is structured as follows: first, we advance the intersections between development practices and ABSC. Second, we propose psychopolitical foresensing as an approach for bringing social and cultural transformation at scale. Finally, we present the initial parameters of our action research with Brazilian leaders.

Keywords

development interventions, awareness-based systems change, psychopolitics, sustainable development goals (SDGs)

We have entered an Age of Disruption. Yet the possibility of profound personal, societal, and global renewal has never been more real. Now is our time.

—Scharmer & Kaeufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*

The Context of the Project

There is wide recognition that the United Nations Agenda 2030 for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have brought a global sense of urgency to tackle international development issues, affecting the way governments, companies and civil society understand and communicate about sustainable development and corporate responsibility (Biermann et al., 2022). In the private sector, many companies have understood that disregarding sustainable practices can be detrimental to the economic performance of firms. In fact, 15 out of the 17 S&P 500 bankruptcies that happened between 2005 and 2015 were in companies with poor environmental and social scores (Samans & Nelson, 2022b).

Many critics would argue that this is all about profit. Business concerns with the public interest would be no more than a hypocritical strategy to create the illusion of progress. However, no profound change would happen, given that the status quo of those in power remains the same (Bebchuk & Tallarita, 2020; Armstrong, 2020; Pérez et al., 2022; Samans & Nelson, 2022a; Phillips-Fein, 2022). According to this view, even if sustainable practices were consistently implemented, there is still a long journey ahead for fixing capitalism from increased inequality, climate change and the threat of authoritarianism. Indeed, some speak of “Sustainable Survival Goals” to refer to an era in which everyday life is more often about survival, not progress (Sachs, 2019).

We (the authors) are also inclined to embark on this overall feeling of disappointment and criticism, but there is something inside us that resists this narrative of failure. Our encounter was motivated by common uneasiness coming from different paths of life. Maria comes from decades of practice with clinical psychotherapy and Fernanda has a background in sustainable development

projects. One day, I (Fernanda) was approached by an heir of the mining industry in Minas Gerais who revealed that they were feeling guilty for receiving money from a sector that was built in unsustainable exploitation. I shared this story with Maria and she also observed similar stories in her clinic practice. Over the last years, we have observed numerous cases of people who left their well-paid jobs in the corporate world to follow a pathway to greater wellbeing. We also have noticed leaders of prestigious companies who have succeeded in their pursuit of money, status and fame but are desperate for healing their souls. It is also not uncommon to find young heirs, who are entitled to receive their family business and properties and conceive of their inheritance as a curse rather than a blessing.

What these cases have in common is a general feeling of dissatisfaction and a genuine urge to find a purpose to create collective impact. Both of us understood that something was wrong, and it had to do with the rupture of the invisible bridges that connect individuals and society. This challenge activated our interest in working with the connection between individual purpose and collective wellbeing. What if we guide this discontentment to become active engagement with social transformation?

In this regard, the way-out we *foresense* comes from deeper and subtler strategies of working with social transformation. We propose the term *foresense* instead of *foresee* to shed light on the unconscious elements that we want to explore when understanding alternative futures. In this regard, *foresense* goes beyond ordinary reasoning and experience to refer to the knowledge that emerges with inner observation. Inspired by the Greek mythological figure, Cassandra, who accurately *foresensed* an upcoming disaster, but was disbelieved, we understand that alternative futures need to be grounded in the existing assumptions that drive mental models of change.

Our strategic choice is to take advantage of these systemic failures and general feeling of discontentment to propose a theory of change based on a cascading hypothesis: when leaders from profit, non-profit and government organizations *foresense* the connection between individual and collective wellbeing, they are more willing to apply their financial, political and social resources to commit to real change in the direction of SDG goals. This is what psychopolitical foresensing for social transformation (PFST) is about.

By adopting the term *psychopolitical*,¹ we understand that mental processes have become an important source of power in 21st-century society. Recently, Han (2017) has adopted the term to criticize neoliberalism. Evoking the language of the Frankfurt School, Han's argument is that the current economic regime uses Big Data to exploit the psyche and the unconscious self so that individuals may

¹ The term psychopolitical refers both to the study of the psychological aspects of political phenomenon (such as nazism) or to the use of psychological strategies to achieve a political objective (American Psychology Association, 2023).

be more productive. The result is burnout and depression. As such, to escape from the tyranny of neoliberal psychopolitics, Han suggests to *quit*, that is, to turn away from hectic work and to go to “spaces for guarding silence” (Han, 2017, p. 84).

Instead of silence, we want to support transformative action. We are skeptical of the worn-out rhetoric that privileges individual wellbeing above all. We understand that the *cure* for the current discontentment will not be found only in retreats, but also with political engagement. In this sense, the way we adopt psychopolitics also alludes to an emancipatory critique of the “status quo” in order to discover new avenues for change.

We embrace awareness-based methodologies that privilege “subjective and intersubjective, intuitive and heart-based ways of knowing” (Wilson, 2022, p. 121) to develop PFST. Even though we do not expect to bring any radical innovation at this point, we do believe that we could contribute to advance the debate on theory of change and sustainable development goals by introducing some assumptions of the emerging field of awareness-based systemic theories and integration them into a framework for an action research project (Pomeroy et al., 2021).

In the following sections we will first describe the intersections between development practices and ABSC. Second, we propose *psychopolitical foresensing* as an approach for bringing social and cultural transformation to scale. Finally, we present the initial parameters of our action research with Brazilian leaders.

Redesigning Development Actions: Embracing Awareness-Based System Change

Why is it so hard to implement strategies to change social reality? For decades, scholars and practitioners of the field of international development have been struggling to find the right way to plan and evaluate interventions for solving complex social problems and improving the wellbeing of people. Under the umbrella of the “aid effectiveness agenda,”² a myriad of approaches have been created in order to make sense of the multiple complexities and uncertainties of transformational interventions (Zazueta et al., 2021). In a nutshell, these approaches can be classified in two groups: one that is directly influenced by the logical framework (logframe) and another that is rooted in social anthropology (Earle, 2002).

² The first report to discuss the impacts of development interventions was commissioned by the World Bank in 1969. Since then, the debate on aid effectiveness has been embraced by several development organizations and academia (Cimini, 2015).

Logframe

The logframe mirrors the practice of status quo business and is driven by efficiency analysis focused on the relation between cost and benefits. Approaches driven by cost-benefit analysis rely on logical frameworks or theories of change that work with an *if-then* rationale (Earle, 2002; Hummelbrunner, 2010; Vaessen et al., 2020). This rationale starts with identifying the *need* or *problem* that should be addressed. Then, the intervention is structured to solve the central problem. Basically, this model, also known as logframe³, works as a tool for graphically outlining a hypothesis of how an intervention leads to a change in an outcome through depicting a causal chain of events (Kneale et al., 2018).

According to the *if-then* rationale, if certain *inputs* are provided and certain *activities* are undertaken, then an output is produced (Figure 1). Inputs can be defined as the financial, human, and material resources used for the development intervention whereas outputs are the deliverables of such interventions, such as hospitals, schools, new regulations or laws, campaigns, etc. If outputs are produced/delivered, then outcomes should be expected. Outcomes are understood as the short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention output, usually in the form of behavioral or organizational changes. For instance, increased levels of education (input) can be an outcome of building a new school (output).

A Logical or Results Framework/ Theory of Change Template	If input is provided	Then activity is undertaken	Then output is produced	Then outcome results	Then impact follows
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Figure 1. The Logical Framework or Theory of Change Template. (Source: Andrews, 2018).

Yet, despite the great effort of development practitioners to improve their methodologies for planning and evaluation through managerial tools, the outcomes are questionable. According to a research conducted at Harvard, “something like 51% of World Bank projects are at significant to high risk of failing to foster development outcomes” (Andrews, 2018, p. 15). As managerial approaches attempt to organize a complex reality, there is always the risk of oversimplification. One of the main pitfalls of working with logical frameworks is to use the logframe matrix as a substitute for the design of the intervention, and not as a visual aid (Hummelbrunner, 2010, p.3).

In practice, the great majority of social transformation outcomes are driven by uncertain assumptions and theoretical bets that need to be learned and adapted as the project goes. Best-practices based on pre-established understandings, blueprints or linear sequencing of fixed work plans are not helpful for social transformation. At the same time, actions must be transparent

³ The logframe was originally proposed as a programme design methodology for development interventions by the USAID in the 1970s and later adopted by many international organizations.

and accountable so the outputs and outcomes can be tracked. For this reason, mapping and (even intervening) in the ways of thinking and working of purpose-driven actors is central to improving the level of *change awareness* of their initiatives. This means developing skills for grasping context information, real-time learning and long-term commitment with iterative, flexible and adaptive programming.

In this sense, the second group of approaches attempt to embrace these challenges by calling for a greater understanding of the cultural context and the differing sets of power where interventions take place (Earle, 2002). They offer tools to increase the participation of beneficiaries of the intervention and to grasp the perceptions of the situation held by local stakeholders (Weiss, 1997; Rogers & Weiss, 2007). According to this view, social transformation is essentially about awareness-raising (activating desire and motivation), capacity development (building knowledge, skills and resources), incentives (understanding threats and opportunities) and collective action (enabling coordination and commitment). Therefore, understanding social change in this broader perspective requires a paradigmatic shift to take into account the competing forces and interrelated connections of a social system and diverse deep motivations that drive human behaviour and choices.

Theory of Change (ToC)

The Theory of Change (ToC) has been an important attempt in this direction⁴ (Prinsen & Nijhof, 2015; Doherty et al., 2022). The term ToC was popularized in the field of international development in the 1990s with the work of Carol Weiss, but it became relevant particularly after UNDP started to adopt some of its assumptions on their handbook on planning (United Nation Development Programme, 2009), by proposing a methodology to lay out the sequence of outcomes of development interventions. One of the goals of ToC is actually to make explicit the *hidden aspects* of societal change, shedding light on both individual/internal and collective/external aspects that affect development interventions (see figure 2).

By proposing these variables, ToC has brought social complexity to the core of development planning and evaluation, changing the practices of project design and implementation in the ground. Working with such approaches requires development practitioners and policy makers to look behind the facade of visible and tangible aspects of technical problem-solving and to pay more attention to cultural and social aspects.

⁴ There is an important caveat: not all approaches that call themselves TOC are the same. It is common to find TOC that resembles the first group applying “if-then” causal chains, such as the one described by van der Laan et al. (2020). In fact, people may find it difficult to differentiate theory of change from the traditional logframe (Vogel, 2012).

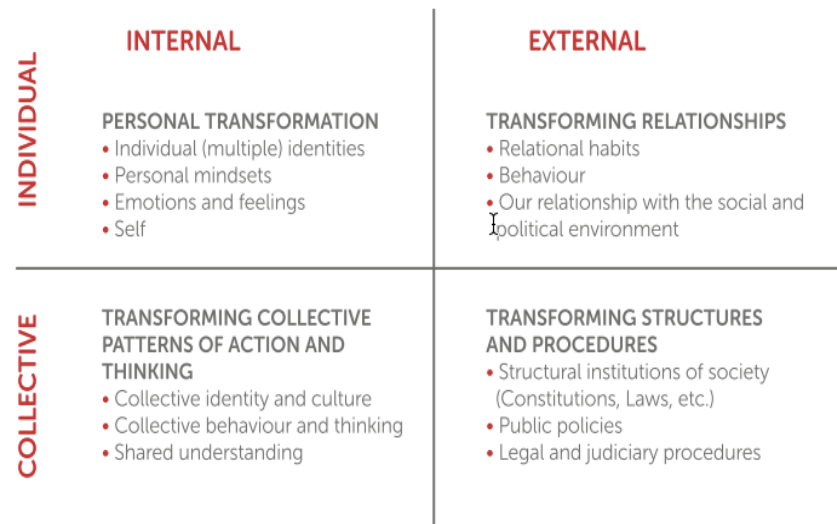


Figure 2. The four dimensions of change. (Source: Van Es et al., 2015).

According to Prinsen and Nijhof (2015), ToC advances the logframe in five main aspects:

1. Focusing on the long-term impact, connecting project actions with long term societal changes.
2. Clarifying the pathway of long complex cause-effect relations.
3. Stating the assumptions (and risks) underpinning cause–effect relations by recognizing that the ideas and beliefs people have—consciously or not—about how to change their lives and achieve their goals function as deep drivers of the choices they make.
4. Acknowledging complexity of development and change processes, introducing systemic thinking to development interventions.

Engaging with primary stakeholders, introducing participatory approaches and making room for issues related to power disputes and ownership.

Although ToC has helped leaders and organizations in the field of international development to better understand the social context in which they want to intervene, its practical use is still questionable. One of the main critiques is that the adoption of the assumptions of ToC to plan development interventions is not feasible because it requires vast amounts of qualitative data and takes a lot of time. Critics of the complexity of ToC advocate that there is no need to open the “black-box” of mental models and social relations, because most societal processes are too complex to be explained or understood in a systematic way. Simply put, they say “it is not necessary to know how aspirin works, as it is sufficient to know it is an effective solution for headaches” (Prinsen & Nijhof, 2015, p. 237).

In our view, the main problem of current versions of ToC is not the excess of complexity but the lack of a philosophical background or a practical toolkit to help navigate through complexity. Our epistemological model is based in concept

of subject beyond of the modern privatized, individualized and conscious subjectivity. On the contrary, we are working with the critic of these assumptions and a new conception of subject, based on the unconscious mind and fantasy.

We understand that ToC can be helpful in normal times, when people believe their daily lives are somewhat predictable and communication flows. In this scenario, the challenge of ToC is to lead change makers and stakeholders *to think* of their own assumptions, by creating the time and place to make them explicit, testable and negotiable.

Yet, in hard times—in moments when dramatic and surprising events can shake up emotions, expectations and common knowledge—elaborating on the emotional and theoretical assumptions that inform “if-then” mental models require more than *thinking* (Banerjee, 2021). Recent research reveals that in moments of social and emotional distress people are more open to being deceived by cognitive bias, false memories and misinformation (Martel et al., 2020; Ecker et al., 2022). Under these circumstances, understanding one’s mental model is actually a very hard task and demands a true work of “polishing the mirror of awareness” (Helminski, 2017, p.113).

According to Helminski (2017), it is possible to restructure the brain by activating a different kind of function, so that there is a fine level of attention that stands above habitual thought, feeling, and behavior. Conscious awareness is part of this process of changing perception. In the psychological domain, psychic material (thoughts, emotions, likes, and dislikes) can obscure the mirror of awareness and, consequently, affect the individual's assumptions and reactions to all kind of personal and collective situations. We could relate these mechanisms to the primary basis of subjective constitution in its relation between the ego and the alter explored by Freud in its double-stage process called primary and secondary narcissism, as well after the Lacan's contribution of this turning point in the human development which he named Mirror Stage (Lacan, 1966).

For this reason, going beyond existing ToC requires an even deeper dive into the unconscious and invisible aspects of social transformation. The emerging field of “awareness-based system change” (ABSC) offers important insights to make this movement feasible. ABSC emerged after the inaugural work of Theory U (Senge & Scharmer, 2008; Scharmer, 2009, 2018; Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013, 2015) and it has been developed as a cross-sectoral, inter- and transdisciplinary field and body of knowing (Koenig et al., 2021). Drawing on the concept of the *social field*, which encompasses the *source conditions* that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing in systems, ABSC attempts to connect the outside (the third-person view) with the inside (the first- and second-person

views)⁵, bringing psychological and sociological models together to address the problem of social change.

In this sense, *Theory U* is the first attempt to make this connection by developing a pathway to guide individuals to access *the source level* of transformation to creatively elaborate changing practices. The U-shape represents the archetypal journey of inner-social transformation and entails seven stages designed to move out from ordinary cognition to a deeper level of awareness (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Theory U. (Source: Scharmer & Kaeufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*).

Although this journey is open to anyone,⁶ it has been largely applied to the inner transformation of leaders with the resources to make significant change in their surroundings. The proponents of Theory U understood through their research that the success of actions for change does not depend on *what* leaders do or *how* they do it, but their *interior condition*, that is, the inner place from which they operate—the source and quality of their attention (Scharmer, 2009, p. 27).

Theory U goes beyond new paradigms of leadership, such as *adaptive leadership*⁷ (Pascale et al., 2000; Grashow et al., 2009) by offering a more

⁵ First-person perspective relates to the individual experience in and of the social field, second-person to the intersubjective, shared experience, and third-person to what can be known about the social field through external observation.” (Pomeroy et al ,2021)

⁶ Through u-lab, which is a free online course on "Leading from the emerging future," this content can reach a wide and diverse audience.

⁷Adaptive leadership refers to a framework of business studies that emphasizes the need of individuals and organizations to implement behavioural changes in order to navigate challenging

compassionate philosophical ground to guide personal transformation. The intended transformation comes with the reflexive practices of empathic listening and deep curiosity (open mind), compassion (open heart) and courage (open will). According to Scharmer and Kaeufer (2013):

The core of this technology [the U process] focuses on tuning three instruments: the open mind, the open heart, and the open will. With an open mind, we can suspend old habits of thought. With an open heart, we can empathize, or see a situation through the eyes of someone else. With an open will, we can let go and let the new come. (p. 22).

The ultimate goal of applying this framework to leaders of change is to guide them to respond to complex challenges from a deep place that is driven to the emerging future rather than by the reaction against patterns from the past (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). This proposal might bring a direction of change from focusing on the wellbeing of oneself to the wellbeing of the collective, completing the loop of ego-to-eco systemic change and his return do the ego.

Following these assumptions, we hypothesize that the solution to the emerging challenges of the 21st century requires a radical turn from conventional development approaches (both logframe and ToC) to ABSC practices. Yet, while we recognize that raising individual awareness is a necessary condition for societal transformation, we are still far from connecting collective awareness to the practices of the development field. The next section explores this challenge by presenting the approach we developed inspired by ABSC to guide our action research with Brazilian leaders.

The Journey of Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation (PFST)

In the last decade, Brazil has followed the upsetting trend of divisiveness and polarization (Oliveira, 2020) observed in other parts of the globe. These trends include an increasing economic divide between have and have-nots; an ecological divide between environmentalists/Indigenous population and miners/landlords; a political divide between right and left-wing policies; and the cultural and societal divide between liberals and conservatives. Although none of these divides are new, they have been exacerbated by the algorithmic bubbles of social media, adding new layers of identity divisions to the existing structural asymmetries. As a result, we observe the fragmentation of the social fabric that underpins the realm of politics, jeopardizing any attempt of collective achievements that requires negotiation, coordination and long-term commitment.

environments and moments of chaos. It has been used by practitioners and scholars in the field of change and innovation. In a nutshell, it proposes the substitution of technical-cantered and top-down problem solving models to dynamic, participatory and horizontal solutions.

Moments of abrupt intersubjective divides—like conflicts, crises, and loss of a safe and stable place in a chaotic or meaningless world—are followed by suffering and distress within personal and professional relationships. And although the effects of disrupting situations may vary across social groups, no one is immune. Numerous studies have indicated that the incidence of burnout and depression among changemakers and leaders is on the rise (Severns Guntzel & Murphy Johnson, 2020). While they are trying to cope with pressing challenges in their organizations, they are also dealing with noisy disinformation and lack of trust.

We understand that breaking free from this vicious cycle, requires leaders to embark on a journey of making personal and social meaning, purpose and creation. The conceptual journey we propose starts with the challenge of self-exploration. There are many divides to consider and, consequently, multiple bubbles (or places) where *I* can find *myself*. Each of these bubbles offers mental models that structure different *if-then* assumptions. For instance, where do I position myself in the bubble of finite and infinite resources? Do I believe (or understand) that we live in a zero-sum game that structures the divide between have and have-nots or do I believe that there are equal opportunities for everybody? And what are the implications of my beliefs and understanding? Who is in the same bubble that I am? Do we share other bubbles? Who is outside this bubble? What do I feel for them: anger, fear, empathy, indifference, respect?

Finding oneself requires “polishing the mirror” of awareness, as suggested by Helminski (2017). Yet, the mirror is only a partial metaphor for human awareness, because unlike a mirror, this awareness can reflect many levels of reality in addition to the physical—emotions, thoughts, and subtler perceptions, such as intuition (Helminski, 2017). In the psychological domain, psychic material (thoughts, emotions, likes, and dislikes) can obscure the mirror. A compulsive thought—a criticism, for instance, repeated unconsciously—can contribute to an accumulation of mental dust. So, to discover the different levels on which this polishing needs to occur and how the mirror itself might be polished, we need to pass over the threshold between our society’s distorted norms and that unknown territory that is the “soul’s true land” (Helminski, 2017, p.117)

The first step of the journey leads to an exploratory investigation of how we end up placing ourselves in this or that bubble. Was I driven by society’s pushes or by this unknown territory called *my truth*? Answering this question requires us to tap into a deeper level of investigation that only can be achieved by *presence*. Presence is essentially the state of being in the present moment and it is one of the main goals of mindfulness and meditation practices. For this reason, the first pillar of our approach is to find oneself through the exercise of polishing the mirror and being present.

The second pillar to navigate around multiple divides is finding the *other*. By finding others, we don't mean to find and *classify* them, but to *sense* them with affection through the lens of compassionate intersubjectivity, as proposed by

ABSC approaches. *Experiencing* different ways to position ourselves is the only way to get on the edge of the bubbles one is located and eventually deconstruct the *Self* by *immersing* in a new subjectivity field. Here we should go back to the etymology and remember that compassion comes from Greek roots *com* (meaning *with*) and *Pathos* (meaning *emotion*). Embracing *Pathos*, or empathy, means going beyond the modern rational paradigm structured under *Logos* (logic) to build a dialectic relation between Logos and Pathos, Conscious and Unconscious, Me and Other (Dibi-Huberman, 2013).

In our journey, experiencing *others* is crucial. First of all, experiencing another enriches the subjective experience itself, in terms of the density of the inner world experience of the self. At this stage, we propose the full activation of the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) plus an additional one: intuition. Activating our ability to expand our cultural experiences and sense of others is part of the journey of evolving the self, but it is also part of the journey of living in society. In a world in which relations of proximity are driven by algorithms, only the real senses can guide us to overcome the pulse of *likes* and *dislikes* that polarize our communities, our families, and our organizations.

The third pillar of our approach is to find space for action between oneself and others. This involves overcoming the blind spots created by disruptions in intersubjectivity, in order to establish common ground and envision a new future by embracing a broader perspective. Its main task is to reconnect what has been torn apart. This requires finding symbolic and physical spaces where diverse individuals can interact, reconnect and share. Hence, the third pillar functions as a force that draws opposing polarities towards the center.

Together, the three pillars form the shape of a lemniscate, commonly known as the symbol of the infinity. Like a circle, it has no beginning or end, yet its centre holds immense power, distorting the circular form and bringing the superior and inferior edges towards it. There are many interpretations of the infinity symbol. The infinity carries the meaning of a dynamic repetition that represents the continual motion of the universe. It also signifies the magnetic force between opposites. So, every movement that follows the pattern of dis-membering and re-membering in a repetitive way has the shape of the infinity:

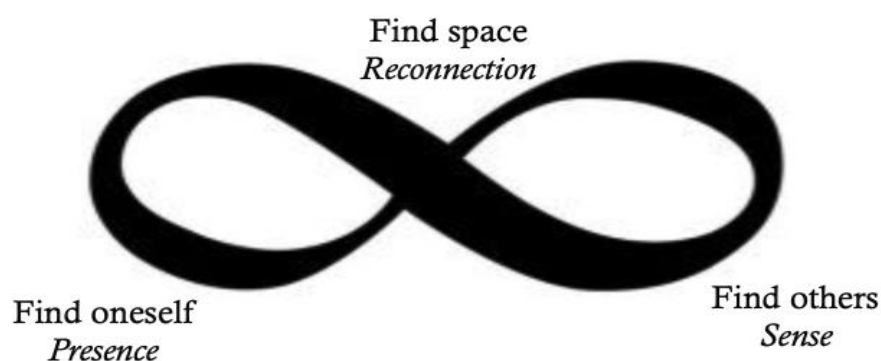


Figure 4. Psychopolitical foresensing for social and cultural transformation.

We intend to apply the PFST journey of finding *oneself-others-space* through three fundamental actions: observation, repetition and integration. Many techniques can improve our capacity for observation. One particularly powerful method is to observe the driving forces behind symbolic archetypes present in myths, literature and movies and how they resonate with our own journeys (Campbell, 2008).

By observing the inherent behaviors within human beings and social interactions, including within our organizations and ourselves, we can experience new ways of *presence-sense-reconnection*. The ability to be present, to sense and to hold space for reconnection, is part of our basic structure as social beings and can be polished by meditation, empathetic listening, journaling and many other dynamics. The benefits of such practices can reverberate in our journey through repetition. Repeat them in every encounter, in every challenge, in every opportunity. Repetition is the driving force of infinity, and it also serves as the mechanism for learning and integration. Unlike pathological repetition that drains our energy, the repetition of *presence-sense-reconnection* has the potential to promote healing and improve mental health. It is important to remember, in the context of this discussion, that the concept of mental health has become more complex in recent decades, and it now encompasses collective and *organizational health* and the wider goal of improving wellbeing of the whole.

Finally, how can we integrate inner change with social and cultural transformation? How can the projects and interventions that we step into benefit the quality of our psychopolitical foresensing? Although our model has not yet been tested, we draw guidance from existing cases that have adopted similar approaches to guide our practical steps.

The U-school for Transformation⁸ offers a box of tools and practices, and a process, that have been used by thousands of organizations worldwide and are freely available (Arts et al., 2021). These tools have helped individuals and communities to address broad issues such as climate change, food systems, inequality, education, health care, and more. In Brazil, an emerging field of action research has embraced awareness-based approaches. Vianna (2022) carried out an online practical experience of the application of Theory U with citizens of the city of Taguatinga, Distrito Federal, Brazil, from 2020 to 2021, during the period of social isolation prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found out that despite socio-political tensions, the use of reflexive practice tools effectively facilitated interactions between individuals.

⁸See: <https://www.u-school.org>

Action Research with Brazilian Leaders

The first application of our action research will focus on Brazil. We choose this focus for three reasons. First, Brazil is characterized by social and economic inequality, which has led to polarization in recent years. This polarization has affected the commitment of national organizations to long-term goals and collective action. Second, the ways national elites perceive and act towards social transformation drive the direction and pace for developing SDGs in both the public and private sectors. Third, there is a wide gap between social awareness and effective action that needs to be bridged. We see these challenges as both obstacles and opportunities for the development of our approach for psychopolitical foresensing for social transformation (PFST).

Our first task is to empirically evaluate the level of social awareness among Brazilian leaders of different sectors. For this assessment, we adopt the method of elite interviewing. The term *elite* does not exclusively refer to individuals with high economic standing but rather individuals chosen for a particular reason based on their position (Hochschild, 2005). Elite interviewing has been widely used to gather rich details not only about specific individuals, but also to make inferences about attitudes, values and beliefs of a broader group that is not directly interviewed (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Goldstein, 2003). Elite informants are also key to influencing important outcomes, either individually or collectively (e.g., as members of a board) (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019).

We adopt snowball sampling, starting with in-depth interviews with individuals from our personal and professional networks. Our network has been cultivated through years of clinic and consultant practice, which allowed us to understand the need for deeper ways to address individual and collective wellbeing. We choose to start with our own networks to access respondents who might not otherwise be available. Additionally, participants tend to be more open about personal information with researchers they know or who have been validated by someone they know (Lamont & White, 2005).

In this sense, the snowball sampling method helps us to identify participants who are willing to engage in conversations about individual and collective wellbeing. The only requirement is that they represent one of the following groups: corporate business, government and politics, culture and education, non-profit organizations and social media. We choose these five groups to cover a broad spectrum of social fields so we can understand the particularity of each sector, including the emerging field of digital influencers who have been very active in the public debate. We will conduct interviews with at least three individuals from each group, totalling at least 15 interviews. In adopting this strategy, we are not seeking large-scale generalizability, but to collect perceptions that are significant for designing different *personas* that would benefit from PFST.

The leading question in the interviews will revolve around the participants' perception of the current state of affairs and possible avenues for change. The interviews are semi-structured, covering individual topics such as personal

wellbeing, fears and desires, and collective topics, such as national concerns, societal achievements and discontent. As the conversation unfolds, we will delve into the connection between the two axes, exploring potential spaces for enhancing the *self-other* link.

We are aware that the nation's leaders do not constitute a homogenous group (De Swaan 1988; De Swaan et al., 2000; Latour, 2022). Their level of collective awareness may vary significantly over time and depending on the nature of their resources (material, symbolic, political, etc). Similarly, their basic attitudes toward sustainable goals can range from complete moral indifference to full commitment to collective action. The main goal is to depict mental archetypes of change: what do you desire to change? Is this change feasible? How can you be involved with change?

Once this first assessment is complete, we will design PFST and invite our interviewees and their referrals to join an experimental journey of awareness-based transformation. At this stage, individuals will be invited to co-fund the experiment as part of a paid leadership development program. The fees will be determined through a *soft-launch* pricing strategy, in which we will offer a discount in exchange for honest feedback. The fees will cover our own time and the cost of guest facilitators, as there is currently no external funding supporting the project.

Final Remarks

The main goal of the PFST journey is to enhance awareness and action towards SDGs. Drawing on awareness-based theories, such as the Theory U, our infinity shape intends to discover new subjective and objective spaces in which change can occur. We understand that navigating the loop of *presence-sense-reconnection* is a *necessary*, but *insufficient* condition to ignite the process of change. It also depends on the willingness of individuals to enact change and the social context in which actions happen.

This is why we have chosen to initially target those who have the resources to implement transformation at large scale: the leaders and changemakers of profit, nonprofit, government and academic organizations. To accurately diagnose and advance our approach, we propose an action research design starting with in-depth interviews. Subsequent steps include an experimental leadership development program to test PFST. We will consider our goal achieved if the leaders who undergo this journey comprehend that generating impact is not about marketing or financial results, but about discovering new ways to achieve personal and collective wellbeing. The expected outcome is their willingness to apply their resources to advance the institutional development of sustainability departments within their organizations.

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