

Invited Article

Fourth Person:

The Knowing of the Field

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Abstract

In the context of polycrisis and systemic collapse, the primary challenge we face is a widely shared sense of collective depression—a lack of agency in regard to the bigger picture. What does it take to serve evolutionary transformation in the face of this collapse? In our view, it takes a form of knowing which extends beyond the current constructs of first-, second- and third-person knowing around which much of our current learning, knowledge, and leadership systems are organized. In this paper, we suggest fourth-person knowing as a distinct epistemology at the intersection of the other three, and we draw on our action research to illuminate five phenomena that point to and distinguish fourth-person knowing: (1) knowing that comes through me but is not of me; (2) knowing that shows up in my individual experience as a decentering of perception; (3) a heightened sense of potential, of possibilities that previously were experienced as unattainable now appear to be in reach; (4) sensing your own agency in helping the ‘universe’ (the larger field) to evolve; and (5) significant long term impact in terms of practical results. It is our hope that by

articulating fourth person knowing we can provide an epistemic basis upon which research and inquiry methodologies can be built, complementing first-, second- and third-person forms of inquiry, methodologies based on deep sensing and presencing that support individuals and collectives to recognize, connect with and manifest what is theirs to do in the wider context of this moment and the incipient patterns of emergence and movement making.

Keywords

fourth-person knowing, Theory U, social field, trans-subjectivity, self-transcending knowledge, presencing, awareness-based systems change

Introduction

The number one problem facing humanity today is not climate change or inequality or war. It is not the proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI). Rather, it is our sense that we are powerless to change any of it. The old ways of knowing and acting in our world are no longer sufficient. Our systems are collapsing. If we are going to serve societal transformation in the face of this collapse, as we believe is fully possible, we need to draw on a new form of knowing—knowing for transformative action.

Our existing categories of knowing—first-person (subjective), second-person (intersubjective), and third-person (outside-objective)—upon which our systems of learning, knowledge creation, and leadership are based, are important but not sufficient to activate the deep shift and energy that are called for now. We need a quality of knowing that allows us to connect with and appreciate more deeply the dignity and interiority of the worlds that surround us and that we co-shape and co-enact moment to moment. It is the collective interior of the worlds co-arising in us in general, and the more subtle and emerging qualities of social systems in particular, that have remained in an epistemological blind spot if seen from the viewpoint of positivist approaches to science. And yet, deep in our own experience, many citizens, change makers, and leaders know that to meaningfully address the profound polycrisis of our time we need to tap into a deeper source of knowing. That source of knowing already exists and in many ways underlies the actions of thousands, if not millions, of innovators and networked communities around the world. This deep collective awareness is a gateway to emerging future possibilities that depend on our presence and agency to manifest. We believe it is this very personal and yet collective-interior way of sensing and knowing that is at the core of our planetary moment and movement making and that we refer to and introduce here as *fourth-person knowing*.

In this paper, we unpack the fourth-person perspective, first making the case that it is a knowledge type *sui generis*, epistemologically distinct from the other three forms, and then drawing on our action research to illuminate its source, form, and nature. Fourth-person knowing can be thought of as an expression and extension of *self-transcending knowledge*, or “tacit knowledge prior to its

embodiment in day-to-day practices, (Scharmer, 2001, p. 139), which emphasizes “the ability to sense and presence the emerging opportunities, to see the coming-into-being of the new” (Scharmer, 2001, p. 137). The extension here is to bring self-transcending knowing into the frame of person-perspective epistemologies (first-, second- and third-person knowing), exploring the epistemic space where the boundary between these forms of knowing blurs, and where there is *both* overlap and differentiation between knower and known. One of our intentions in bringing self-transcending knowing into the fourth-person frame is to provide an epistemological basis upon which research and inquiry methodologies can be built in parallel to first-, second- and third-person forms of inquiry—methodologies based on *sensing* and *presencing*.

The concept of presencing, and the Theory U approach that underpins it (Scharmer, 2016, 2018; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, *forthcoming*), is based on the assumption that human beings have the capacity for deep sensing. It is a capacity for sensing not only what is, through perspective taking and tuning in to different perspectives, but also for sensing what isn't *yet*, what is *about to emerge*. Sensing is really about embodied knowing. It is aesthetic, drawing on the Greek *aisthesis*: the knowing of all our senses. Presencing combines sensing with actualizing the emerging future.

Presencing is essentially an antidote to positivism, which separates mind and world. The core assumption underlying fourth-person knowing is that mind and world are not separate, but rather are intertwined in a co-shaping relationship. As such, presencing sits firmly in the blind spot of generative artificial intelligence (AI). AI excels at processing, ordering, and extrapolating from masses of existing data, and this is the place from which it projects the future. But AI cannot source from this deeper level of sensing, which we maintain is where the new comes into being. Presencing is therefore the source of knowing needed to address the deeper dimensions of the challenges we face. The more the capacity for deep sensing and presencing is developed and cultivated, the more easily skilled change makers, leaders, and other developmental professionals will be able to tune in to latent developmental possibilities that are neither empirically evident (yet) nor merely a subjective fiction in the eye of the beholder. They can be evidenced through a new category of cognitive practices that, in this article, we call fourth-person knowing.

A Blind Spot in Western Cognition

The fourth-person perspective addresses a type of knowing that is largely missing in today's institutions of science, education, and societal decision making. It is missing because it addresses a blind spot in Western cognitive epistemologies. Neurophenomenologist Francisco Varela described experience as being “at the very center of many traditions, but it has been obscured in the Western tradition, particularly in science...it is as if there's a big blind spot” (as cited in Scharmer, 2000, p. 1).

Varela developed a synthesis of the three approaches that he saw as addressing this blind spot—psychological introspection, phenomenology, and meditation—to draw out and formalize what was methodologically consistent across them. His intention was to build and support a science “which includes first-person, subjective experience as an explicit and active component” (Varela & Shear, 1999, p. 2). Varela and his colleagues identified a framework and method for inquiring into first-person experience, what they called the core process of *becoming aware*, made up of the three gestures of *suspension*, *redirection*, and *letting go* (Depraz et al., 2003). They maintained that these gestures can be, and need to be, cultivated through practice in order to build the capacity to access first-person experience such that it moves beyond impressionistic descriptions to “phenomenal descriptions that are rich and subtly interconnected enough in comparison to third-person accounts” (Varela & Shear, 1999, p. 2).

The Theory U framework is grounded in the three gestures of becoming aware outlined by Varela and colleagues, but it extends their application from individual cognition to social systems. The resulting Matrix of Social Evolution (*Figure 1*) is based on two axes: the shifts of awareness and consciousness that Varela described (suspension, redirection, letting go) on the vertical axis, and the different levels of social systems (micro, meso, macro, mundo) on the horizontal axis.

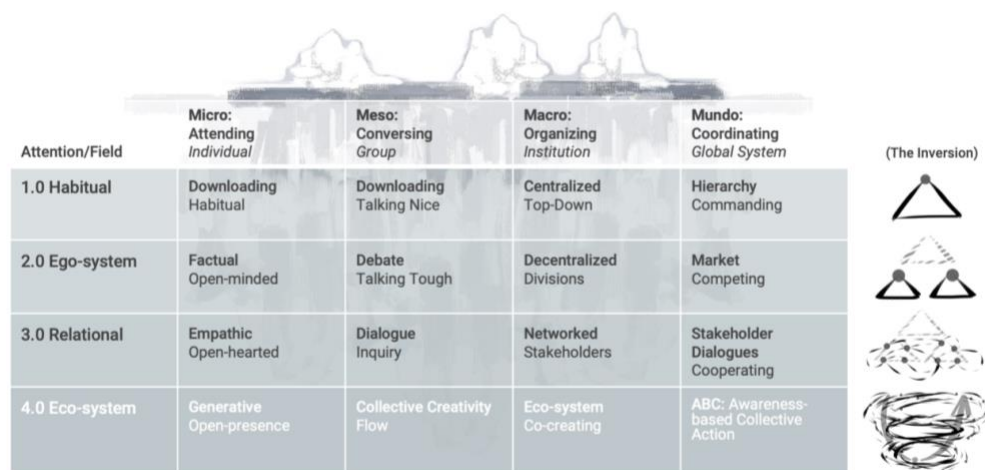


Figure 1. Matrix of Social Evolution (Scharmer, 2018)

As people or social entities go down the left side of the U (i.e., down the vertical axis of *Figure 1*) in their process of cognition, the boundaries between first-, second-, and third-person knowing as discrete experiences begin to fade. The source of cognition shifts to a realm of interaction that blends subjective, objective, and intersubjective knowing, which we refer to as self-transcending, or *trans-subjective*, knowing. Trans-subjective knowing is the knowing of the collective interior. While it shows up in our subjective experience, it is not purely subjective knowing; nor is it purely objective or intersubjective. Rather, trans-subjective knowing incorporates and blurs the boundaries between all these

perspectives to connect with a distinct form of knowing that is experienced as coming *through* us but is not *of* us.

Essential to the exploration of the collective interior is the concept of the *social field* (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023; Scharmer 2015, 2016). The social field can be thought of as the interiority of a social system. It is the web of relationships and interactions that give a social space or system its unique quality. The social field has a manifest dimension that includes visible results of the system and relational patterns, and it also has a source dimension from which the manifest qualities of the relational space arise (see Figure 1). Elsewhere we have defined social fields as “the entirety of the social system with an emphasis on *the source conditions* that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing and organizing, which in turn produce practical results” (Scharmer et al., 2021, p. 634). We emphasize the source dimension as it has been largely overlooked in the consideration of social systems; in other words, it is the blind spot of Western cognition. As we move through the layers of interiority of the social system, through paradigms of thought, through the felt sense or quality of the space, we get to the source dimension where the layers above originate. Whereas the upper dimensions have a past/present quality—for example, carrying collective memory or having an in-the-moment felt quality or atmosphere—the source dimension has a future orientation, connecting with or even *pulling toward* that which is coming into being. This gives the source dimension of the social field a quality of being situated in a particular setting yet also connected to a more universal and cosmological set of forces. It is the knowing that arises at the source level of the collective interior that we consider to be fourth-person knowing.

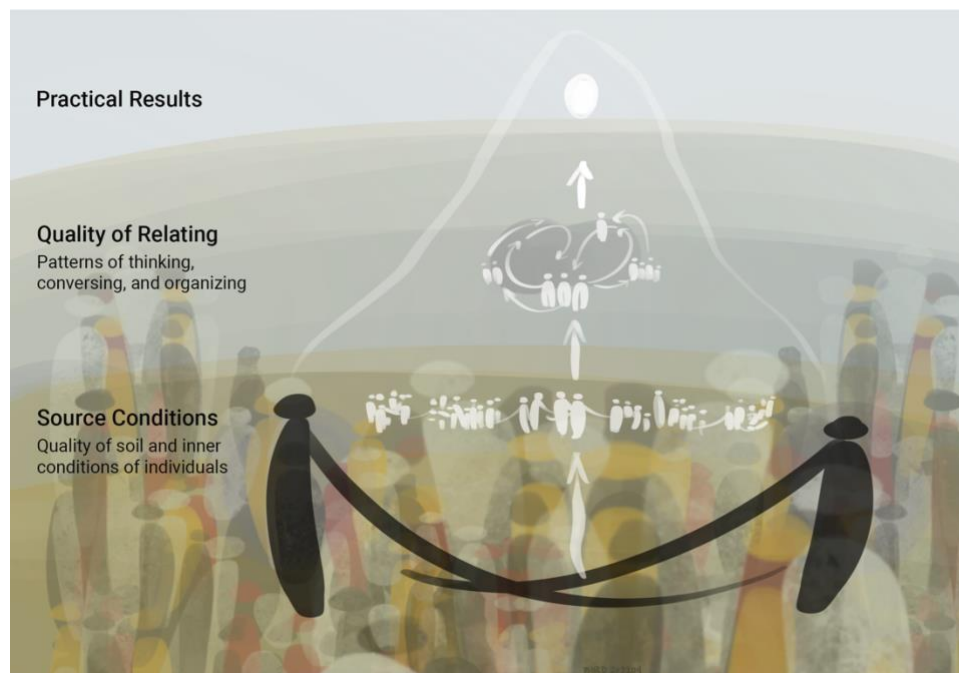


Figure 2. Social Field (Image by Kelvy Bird).

Just as we can refine our capacity to discern, observe, and describe first-person experience in the way Varela describes, so can we build our capacity to access fourth-person knowing, the knowing of the field, through similar processes applied to the collective. Thus, the work of Varela and colleagues provides a foundation and point of departure. The key differentiator between our work and this foundation is that while Varela's core unit of analysis was individual inner experience, our primary focus is the collective inner experience.

1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-Person Perspectives in Action Research

As practitioners of awareness-based systems change, our focus and intention for the work is to support transformative action in organizations and other systems by providing a framework and methodology for sourcing change from a different kind of consciousness. We therefore locate ourselves within the tradition of action research with its dual focus on democratic knowledge creation and participative processes for systems change. As Bradbury (2015) describes, "action research is emergent and developmental. It concerns practical issues and human flourishing. Its modality is primarily participative and democratic, working with participants and toward knowledge in action" (pp. 7–8). Action research, perhaps more than any other field, has consciously worked to integrate multiple epistemic lenses, using first-, second-, and third-person inquiry as a frame for the work (see Gearty & Coghlan, 2018; Hynes, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Reason & Torbert, 2001). Within the action research tradition, each perspective is a complementary strategy or approach in the change process.

First-person perspective can be understood as the subjective experience of the individual. In action research the emphasis in first-person work is on the qualities action researchers bring to an intervention, including sensitivity, discernment, and "an attitude of inquiry" (Marshall, 2004, 2015). First-person inquiry skills include the ability to see one's own habits of thought, to test assumptions, to be open to new data, to bring curiosity to the inquiry process, and to be aware of the cognitive and value processes that lead to decisions (Brydon-Miller & Coghlan, 2019; Gearty & Coghlan, 2018; Marshall 2004, 2015; Reason & Torbert, 2001). As the researcher-intervener is a core *instrument* of the work, attention to the quality and capacity of that instrument is paramount. First-person subjective knowing is intentionally developed for this purpose.

Second-person perspective falls into the realm of intersubjective experience. Action research, with its focus on systems change, defines this specifically as face-to-face engagement in the change process. Coghlan (2019) describes second-person inquiry as the cyclical processes of planning, action, and evaluation in groups and organizations that make up the core activities of a change intervention, usually with the intention of surfacing assumptions and finding common ground. In action research, second-person inquiry is held as primary. Hynes (2013) observes, "in action research literature, second person inquiry attracts the most attention and appears to have the most immediate impact in terms of changes in practice" (p. 55). Gearty & Coghlan (2018) point out that, "as

action research is integrally collaborative and democratic the quality of second person inquiry and action is paramount” (p. 467). We will return to second-person knowing below.

Third-person perspective is what we have come to refer to as objective: the perspective of an observer who sits outside an experience. Action research, with its emphasis on inquiry, describes the third-person view as an arena of engagement that extends beyond those involved directly in a given change process. In action research, third-person inquiry “is reached through dissemination by reporting, publishing, and extrapolating from the concrete to the general” (Gearty & Coghlan, 2018, p. 467). The similarity between the action research frame and the more commonly held “objective observation” frame for the third person is that both describe a perspective outside direct experience.

For scholars and practitioners actively engaged in supporting and facilitating transformative change, action research is primary. That said, the concept of fourth-person knowing derives not only from our action research stance and experience, but also from a broader field of consideration, particularly around the second-person perspective, including cognitive neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology. Within this broader landscape we discover discrepancies and divergence in the conceptualization of the second-person perspective that, for us, highlight the need to articulate a new epistemic perspective.

Second-Person Perspective: Disparity and Divergence

Over the past decade, an interest in the second-person perspective has surfaced within the field of neuroscience and social cognition. In 2013, Schilbach et al. proposed the concept of a second-person approach to social neuroscience. The proposition was founded on the emerging evidence that *engaging* in social interaction is fundamentally different from *observing* social behavior. Redcay and Schilbach (2019), in reviewing findings related to the behavioral and neural mechanisms of real-time social interactions, conclude that these studies “provide strong support for the claim that neural responses differ during interaction and observation” (p. 499). Gallese (2014) further reflects on the neurology and biology of interaction. Well known for his work on motor neurons, he makes the case that while we can view others from a third-person perspective, we also *experience* others through the non-conscious, pre-reflective bodily resonance with the sensory information generated in an interaction (p. 2), describing an experience that is neither entirely subjective nor entirely objective and is, therefore, epistemologically distinct. Moore and Barresi (2017) argue that second-person knowing is distinct from both third-person observation and first-person subjectivity because it incorporates both of those perspectives (p. 5). Pauen (2012), writing from a philosophical perspective, agrees with this view and outlines three requirements for second-person perspective taking: it must draw on the replication or imagination of another’s mental state, it is conscious of a self–other distinction, and it is equally aware of a situational distinction such

that the perceived can distinguish the other person's situation from their own (p. 39). Moore and Barresi (2017) posit that “the experience of interaction may yield forms of information that are unique and critical for social understanding” (p. 1), a point echoed by Redcay and Schilbach (2019). Thus second-person knowing is increasingly recognized within the domain of cognitive science as a distinct epistemology.

In the works mentioned so far in this section, second-person perspective is conceptualized as a capacity to experience and understand the other, perhaps akin to empathy. Another way that the second-person perspective can be conceptualized is as an experience of co-creating knowing, or, thinking as one. In this conceptualization attention is put not only on the neural behavior of individuals in interaction; rather, the *interaction itself* is considered a unique entity with distinct characteristics. In considering the shift from a single-brain to multi-brain focus for studying and understanding the neuroscience of social interaction, Kaiser & Butler (2021) propose the concept of Social Breathing, which they describe as follows:

We use the term Social Breathing to refer to when a multi-person system becomes interwoven through the automatic, implicit, temporal and mutual sharing of social content. The model highlights both the multi-person process itself and the individual abilities that are necessary for engaging in it, as well as the experiential aspect of being interwoven with others. (p. 3)

Implied here is the idea that individuals engaged in social interaction create a *new entity*. This draws on the foundational work of philosopher and cognitive scientist Hanne de Jaegher. De Jaegher and di Paolo (2007) propose an enacted approach to social cognition that they call participatory sense making. This approach views *interaction* as primary in the meaning-making process. Centering interaction as the source of social cognition moves away from *either* viewing individuals as responding to environmental stimuli (solely externally stimulated) *or* as satisfying internal demands (solely internally stimulated) (de Jaegher & di Paolo, 2007, p. 487). The authors explain,

Social interaction is the regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents, where the regulation is aimed at aspects of the coupling itself so that it constitutes *an emergent autonomous organization* [emphasis added] in the domain of relational dynamics, without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved... (de Jaegher & di Paolo, 2007, p. 493)

The “emergent autonomous organization” reflects Maturana and Varela’s (1991) notion of *autopoiesis*—the self-organizing, -producing, and -maintaining nature of living systems. The living system, or *whole*, possesses qualities and characteristics that can be differentiated from those of its constituent parts. That the whole is a unique entity, more than (or at least different from) the sum of its parts, is an ontological standpoint viewing collective experience as more than transactional or even interactive. Rather, the whole is viewed as an emergent

entity worthy of attention and its own specific forms of inquiry. In this way, the second-person perspective has both an epistemological and ontological foundation.

To understand the ontological nature of second-person knowing more deeply, we turn from cognitive science to transpersonal psychology and the work of de Quincey (2000). De Quincey distinguishes between two levels of intersubjectivity. The first, which he describes as “weak-experiential” is defined as “mutual engagement and participation between independent subjects, which conditions their respective experience” (p. 138). This conceptualization is reflective of the second-person perspective that Moore and Barresi (2017) describe as “an understanding of intentional relations” (p. 1). De Quincey then conceptualizes the second type of intersubjectivity, described as “strong-experiential” as “mutual co-arising and engagement of interdependent subjects, or intersubjects, which creates their respective experience” (p. 138). It is here that we begin to touch on the phenomenon that is the focus of this paper, the knowing of the field, for while the autonomy of the interaction is recognized in some of the emerging thinking in social cognition, the emphasis remains on knowing sourced by the interacting subjects. De Quincey points to a different source, drawing on the work of philosopher and theologian Martin Buber. Buber (1966) eloquently describes this source:

In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth “deep calls unto deep,” it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of between. (Buber, 1966, p. 55)

Thus, de Quincey concludes, “Buber gave ontological status to the “between”—a mysterious force, “presence,” or creative milieu, in which the experience of being a self arises” (p. 142). It is this territory we wish to explore.

While the differentiation of types of intersubjectivity is useful, we believe that the need for this differentiation arises from a conflation of two separate epistemologies under the second-person banner: intersubjectivity and trans-subjectivity. Just as it has been argued that the second-person perspective cannot be reduced to either the first- or third-person perspective (Moore and Barresi, 2017; Pauen, 2012; Redcay and Schilbach, 2019), we argue that the fourth-person perspective (trans-subjectivity or self-transcendence) cannot be reduced to a subsection of the second person (intersubjectivity).

Fourth-Person Knowing: The Missing Perspective

Fourth-person knowing has a particular quality of being neither my knowing nor yours, neither solely outside nor inside me but rather something beginning to articulate from a different source that operates beyond these distinctions. Returning to Varela and the redirection of attention described earlier, when the

act of redirection from object to source is applied to *collective* inner experience, what is that source? We identify it as the presence of the social field. Because the social field becomes known to us through our interactions, we have an intimate relationship with it, but the field also takes on its own autonomous beingness.

The beingness of the field is reflected in various forms of non-Western, holistic, and integrated cosmologies and epistemologies such as Daoism and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Maori scholars Johnson, Allport & Boulton (2024) state,

Our worldview includes not only the interconnected ecological, social, psychological, or economic, but also the philosophical and spiritual, and the connection between the Atua (deities) and humanity. (p. 53)

The interconnection that gives rise to fourth-person knowing has been surfaced by Melanie Goodchild, Anishinaabe from Ketegunseebee First Nation, in her work on Relational Systems Thinking. In her dialogue with Haudonosaunee Elders, the source of knowing embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems surfaced repeatedly. Elder Dan Longboat shared, “the authority for our knowledge as Indigenous peoples has come from a place of spirit not out of the minds of men and women” (Goodchild, 2021, p. 88). That knowledge is communicated through an intimate relationship with the land, as Elder Rick Hill explains,

Knowledge is innately tied to the land, it’s right there, it’s waiting for us to pay attention to it, to guide us, through dreams, through visions, through practice, and maybe that’s our greatest strength, is getting people reconnected to the source of knowledge. (Goodchild, 2021, p. 89)

Juxtaposing Western research paradigms with Indigenous paradigms, Goodchild cites Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, who points out that while Western paradigms emphasize individuals as the source of knowledge, in an Indigenous paradigm “knowledge is seen as ‘belonging to the cosmos’ and we humans are only the ‘interpreters’ of that knowledge” (Goodchild, 2022, p. 5). Thus the source of knowledge extends beyond the human, to land and all life, and to the cosmos. It is this perspective we find reflects the concept of fourth-person knowing that we are attempting to articulate here. At its source level, the *knowing of the social field* is an expression of that which is unique and yet universal, or cosmological, and which, through our presence, attention, and intimate relationship with it, can manifest through us.

Fourth-person knowing shows up in our individual experience, but it is not of our making. Nor is it of a specific interaction or intersubjective experience—it is not something that exists only between us. Rather, it is something within, between, and beyond us simultaneously. It is reflective of Rosa’s concept of resonance at its deeper levels: that we can establish a connection to the call of the world through both our inner and outer action in an encounter that

“transforms both sides, subject and the world experienced” (Rosa, 2018, p. 42). We further differentiate fourth-person knowing from existing epistemological perspectives in Table 1.

Perspective	Meta-category	Focus	Origin of Attention	Gesture	Epistemological Expressions	Research Methodologies
First person	Subjective	Me / I	Self-observation: <i>Bending the beam of observation back onto the source of individual emergence</i>	Looking within (self-observation)	Phenomenology Transpersonal psychology Consciousness studies	Auto-Ethnography Contemplative Practice Psychological Introspection
Second person	Inter-subjective	Yours / Ours	Dialogue: <i>Reflective practices at the level of face-to-face discourse</i>	Looking within and outside sequentially Looking at what is in-between	Social Psychology Social Constructivism Critical Theory Intercorporea Phenomenology	Dialogic Inquiry Collective Auto-ethnography Participative Action Research Participant Observation
Third person	Objective	Them / That	Observation: <i>Observer separate from (or exterior to) the observed</i>	Looking outside (mind and world are separate)	Natural science Naïve Realism Traditional Systems Thinking	Interviews Surveys Experimental Design Discourse Analysis
Fourth person	Trans-subjective	Emergent whole	Stillness- (or resonance-) based deep sensing: <i>Bending the beam of observation back onto the sources of collective emergence</i>	Looking within and outside simultaneously (decentered, distributed self; mind and world are not separate)	Transpersonal Social Psychology Objective Idealism Indigenous Knowledge Systems Daoism Theory U	<i>Work in progress:</i> System Sensing and Presencing Social arts–based research practices, such as 4D Mapping

Table 2. First-, Second-, Third-, and Fourth-Person Perspectives

We summarize the essence and implications of each of these epistemologies as follows:

Objectivity

Essence: This perspective seeks truths external to individual perception and biases. It's often associated with scientific methods, which strive to discover facts about the world uninfluenced by personal feelings or opinions.

Implication: A focus on positive, measurable phenomena (third-person view).

Subjectivity

Essence: The emphasis is on individual experience, awareness, and perception. What is considered truth can vary from one individual to another.

Implications: A focus on individual sense making (first-person view).

Intersubjectivity

Essence: This perspective is about shared meanings and understandings. Our personal experiences (subjectivities) might differ, but through exchange, common ground can be discovered.

Implications: An acknowledgment of the social construction of reality (second-person view).

Trans-subjectivity

Essence: This self-transcending human perspective encompasses broader systems of meaning and relationships, especially in relation to the planet (eco-centric) and the universe (cosmo-centric).

Eco-centric: Recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and ecosystems. Humans aren't just observers but also participants in a delicate balance of life, emphasizing harmony with (and as part of) nature.

Cosmo-centric: Situates our existence within the universe. It fosters a sense of humility and awe, recognizing our role on the planet and in the cosmos.

Implications: A more holistic worldview, where actions are weighed not just against human considerations but also against the wellbeing of all the other beings that humans are co-dependent and co-arising with (fourth-person view).

Fourth-Person Phenomena

We have outlined the generic properties of fourth-person knowing that distinguish it from other epistemologies. But how does it show up in our lived experience? As an action research concept, the fourth-person perspective has become known to us through our work designing and facilitating Theory U processes for transformative change. Over the past 20 years, with our Presencing Institute (PI) colleagues, we have brought Theory U processes to institutions and organizations facing real-world challenges around the world¹ and have used Theory U to support wide-scale grassroots action through capacity-building, as well as multi-local and multi-regional activation at scale.²

Two years ago, we began a deep-dive inquiry into a form of knowing that could not be described as exclusively first-, second-, or third-person. We drew on both personal experience and action research data, initially using existing data sources from previous research, and then seeking out new perspectives. A summary of our data sources is listed in Table 2.

Data Source	Timeframe	Description
u-lab Scotland participant interviews	2015–2016	Eight individual and two group interviews totaling 12 interview participants (Pomeroy & Oliver, 2018, 2021).
u-lab Concordia Social Innovation Hub participant interviews	2017–2018	Thirteen individual and two group interviews totaling 17 interview participants.
Berlin Moment Inquiry	July 2019	We revisited the social field experience described as The Berlin Moment in Theory U (see Scharmer, 2018, pp. 109–114) in a reflective “fishbowl” dialogue at the Presencing Institute’s Social Field Research summer school in Berlin.
GAIA Surveys	March–June 2020	We conducted three surveys of participants in the first, ninth, and final GAIA sessions. Responses were received from 503, 449, and 273 participants, respectively.

¹ For examples, see <https://www.u-school.org/acupuncture-points>

² Our signature online capacity-building programs are u-lab 1x and u-lab 2x, engaging over 200,000 individuals and one thousand teams working on systems change projects.

GAIA (Global Activation of Intention and Action) Journey was a global activation initiative launched in response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. A global community of over 15,000 people took part in online community sessions and asynchronous practice groups.

At the regional level, PI works with partners to support three ecosystem activation programs: Ecosystem Leadership Program in Latin America, Ubuntu.Lab in Africa, and United in Diversity in Asia.

GAIA Focus Groups	April–June 2020	Twenty-two individuals from 16 countries participated in four focus groups that were formed during GAIA. Two groups met monthly and two bi-monthly.
Circle of Seven (Co7) Reflection Interview	June 2022	Otto Scharmer interviewed the Co7 members in 2003 as part of the Leadership Dialogues that gave rise to Theory U (see Scharmer, 2016, pp. 151–152; 174–182). In 2022 we interviewed three members, soliciting their reflections on inner collective experience.
Interview with Marian Goodman	April 2023	This interview focused on Marian Goodman’s 10+ years of facilitating Presencing Foundation Programs, exploring social field patterns she observed and experienced over time.
GAIA Focus Group Reflection	April 2023	One of the original GAIA focus groups came together to reflect, three years later, on the impact of their participation.
Interviews with Visual Scribes	July 2022	We interviewed three visual scribes (our Presencing Institute colleagues) about their experience of Generative Scribing, a method which “calls particular attention to an emerging reality that is brought to life by, and for, the social field in which it’s created” (Bird, 2018, p. 1).
SDG Leadership Lab Liberia	2023–2024	We drew on the action research project of our colleagues who co-facilitated the Liberia SDG Leadership Lab initiative. They are engaged in an action inquiry about the lab which includes: deep-dive sense making of their own experiences, nine individual interviews with lab participants, and a collective reflection and sense-making dialogue with twelve participants.

Table 2. Data Sources.

These data sources have all contributed to our understanding of the phenomena we describe here. We compared emerging data with existing data and with that from our own experiences in an iterative, inductive process of dialogue, data immersion, and reflection. Through this process we arrived at five phenomena we believe point to fourth-person knowing and distinguish it from existing epistemological forms, as follows:

1. Fourth-person knowing is experienced as something that is looking at me but isn’t me, a beingness that is not me and yet does not manifest in my/our absence.
2. Fourth-person knowing shows up in our individual experience as a distinct mode of decentering of perception, including a shift in the way we experience space, time, self, light, sensation, and warmth.
3. Fourth-person knowing comes with a heightened sense of possibility in which a future potential, that was previously experienced as out of reach, moves inside the horizon of what feels doable and possible.

4. Fourth-person knowing tends to manifest with an enhanced co-presence of the whole and the individual, making possible the freedom to align individual and collective attention, intention, and agency.
5. Fourth-person knowing tends to activate longer-term generative social fields that give rise to sustained and significant practical results.

We expand on these points below.

You Are Not Alone

1. Fourth-person knowing is experienced as something looking at me that isn't me; a beingness that is not me and yet does not manifest in my/our absence.

Fourth-person knowing is experienced as a beingness that is not me but that attends to me and of which, in a certain moment, I can be very subtly aware. It can communicate with me and, if I attend to it, it has the capacity to pull me forward. Martin Buber (1970) in his seminal *I and Thou*, writes, "This is the eternal origin of art that a human being confronts a form that wants to become a work through him" (p. 60). All creative processes increase your ability to become a channel for what wants to emerge.

Artists recognize this beingness: it is often experienced as the deeper essence of the creative process. In 2004, Ed Bradley, a host of the American television news magazine *60 Minutes*, interviewed legendary singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. He quoted Dylan's autobiography, in which Dylan writes, "I was heading for the fantastic lights. Destiny was looking right at me and nobody else" (Dylan, 2004, p. 24). Later in the interview, having reviewed Dylan's long career, Bradley asks, "Why do you still do it? Why are you still out here?" Dylan replied, "Well, it goes back to the destiny thing. I made a bargain with it a long time ago and I'm holding up my end" (60 Minutes, 2004).

The nature of Dylan's "bargain" is not so much to craft songs, but rather to allow songs that want to be written to manifest through him. This is something he described repeatedly over his career. In the interview with Bradley, he says, "It's like a ghost is writing a song like that, it gives you the song and it goes away. You don't know what it means. Except the ghost picked me to write the song" (60 Minutes, 2004).

This experience finds resonance with the author Elizabeth Gilbert, who also speaks to the experience of being seen by a beingness that communicates with her. She describes her understanding of the creative impulse like this:

I believe that our planet is inhabited not only by animals and plants and bacteria and viruses, but also by *ideas*. Ideas are a disembodied, energetic life form. They are completely separate from us, but capable of interacting with us—albeit strangely. Ideas

have no material body, but they do have consciousness and they most certainly have will. Ideas are driven by a single impulse: to be made manifest. And the only way an idea can be made manifest in our world is through collaboration with a human partner (Gilbert, 2016, pp. 34–35).

She describes the way we often fail to hear the idea or choose to ignore it but how, under the right conditions, we are more receptive to it. She explains, “And then, in a quiet moment, it will ask, ‘Do you want to work with me?’” (Gilbert, 2016, p. 36).

While this characteristic of fourth-person knowing is perhaps the most difficult to articulate, we believe it is quite common. Twenty years ago, as part of the interview series that led to the creation of Theory U, Otto sat down with the Circle of Seven, a group of women with a deep commitment to exploring the unfolding process of transition and transformation by coming together regularly with rituals and processes to support their exploration. In the interview, the group explicitly recognized an entity bearing witness to their process. They describe it in this way:

I feel like a bigger person. I feel fuller in my own being. And I feel empowered or enabled in a particular way. I feel seen. I feel the focus of attention is refined; that it’s nonjudgmental, and loving. And I feel the presence of the Circle Being, which is different from the sum of the individuals. (Scharmer et al., 2003, p. 22)

What they call the Circle Being is one of the clearest articulations of fourth-person knowing that we have come across, and it continues to guide our thinking. It emerges through our shared attention and intention but is a distinct entity in its own right, with its own knowing and intentionality. Reflecting more recently on the experience of the Circle of Seven, circle member Glennifer Gillespie commented:

It's so hard to talk about, because it does really feel as though we've entered another realm, and yet the realm is somehow familiar. But also, it feels partly generated by us. My sense is it's partly the presence of something that's already there anyway, so it feels like a recognition. (Glennifer Gillespie, 2022, Circle of Seven Interview)

We have worked for many years with leaders of many kinds, including founders and CEOs of companies and social enterprises. We often ask participants in this deep leadership work to contemplate the beingness of their organization with a question like this: *If your organization were a living being that could feel, what feelings would that being have at this moment?*

Contemplating that question, they “sense into” that space and jot down whatever feelings come to them. Then we ask: *If your organization were a living being that could speak, what would that being say to you now?* That question, when asked in this context and manner almost always generates profound and

surprising responses. From a social field perspective, the organization is a living being with its own interiority, intention, and *voice*. This voice, the expression of fourth-person knowing, is what we believe surfaces in participants' contemplative journaling practices. In subsequent conversations we have never been told that they found these questions too abstract or inappropriate. On the contrary, most participants find the questions the most helpful and natural because they acknowledge and bring to the surface of attention their deeply held relationship with the living being (the organization) that was always there but not attended to in a conscious manner.

Perception Begins to Happen from the Field

2. Fourth-person knowing shows up in our individual experience as a distinct mode of decentering of perception, including a shift in the way we experience space, time, self, light, sensation, and warmth.

Fourth-person knowing has a specific aesthetic or felt sense. It shows up in our individual experience and is known to us as a distinct and identifiable sensory experience. Like the beingness described above, it is a sense that there is something that moves through me, on a sensory level, but is not of me. Because of this sense that it "is not of me," it is different from first-person subjective experience. Consider this description of a social field from a reflective journaling exercise:

What stood out for me was this warmth. But there was a surprising answer for me in the journaling as well. It felt, and it feels now, as if I remember something, as if I'm recollecting something that I have lived before. It's like a feeling that I already had, and I have forgotten. Or I have filtered it out so I couldn't see it before then. (Nebojsa Illijevski, 2023, Focus Group Reflection)

The sensory nature of the experience is something we often hear from others describing their experience of generative social fields: the space feels warm, time slows down, the light shifts, experience thickens, and there is a sense of familiarity or recognition that the experience is not new. Our colleague Dayna Cunningham describes one such moment in this way:

There was no time. There wasn't time. It was out of body. It was suspended. I was on the edge looking into the center and, and the word that just keeps coming that seems so inadequate is "thick." There was just such a thickness that I think was about the holding. It was about the compassion. But thick is the word. Feeling held. (Dayna Cunningham, 2019, Berlin Moment Dialogue)

For those paying attention, these moments announce themselves with a sense of foreshadowing and a knowing "in the air" and in one's being that something important is happening. It is a felt resonance with the field that surfaces both before and after a collective shift. Generative scribes know this

experience well. Their work involves intentionally connecting with the social field in order to express it visually, so they are particularly well attuned to the field. Each scribe we interviewed for this article spoke of threshold moments when a collective (group) shifts from one kind of operating and awareness to another. Generative scribe Jayce Pei Yu Lee told us, “There's a space of uncertainty. It's kind of ambiguous. But I can feel like, "Oh, there's something there that's cooking" but it's not come to shape yet” (Jayce Pei Yu Lee, 2022, Individual Interview).

This sense that there is something emerging or about to emerge is what we refer to as not-yet-embodied or self-transcending knowing (Scharmer, 2001). Another way to think about this is as potential that has yet to take form. It is sensed or known through subjective experience but isn't purely subjective. Instead, it is the individual perception of potential held within the collective space. Beth Jandernoa, a member of the Circle of Seven, shares her experience holding these moments as a facilitator:

I know we're getting to the threshold when I feel my chest start to open. It feels as though my whole chest is opening up and then I recognize we're there, at the threshold. Then I have a choice—literally physiologically—to keep opening to and with the threshold that is unfolding. (Beth Jandernoa, 2022, Circle of Seven Interview)

Beth then goes on to describe the way her own perception shifts in these moments.

I notice that my seeing shifts from seeing from my regular outer oriented state to seeing with my “inner eyes.” My inner eyes seem to show up in my whole body as though my body becomes my eyes and I'm seeing with every part of me. It's more like 360-degree seeing, rather than just seeing what's in front of me. I'm more here, but I'm also more everywhere. My expanded experience of my own presence deepens in my body yet includes everyone and whatever is in the space. (Beth Jandernoa, 2022, Circle of Seven Interview)

In this situation, the nature and source of perception itself shifts. It moves from a centered perspective—inside my center looking out—to a decentered, multi-local source of perception. This is something we sometimes hear expressed as feeling outside one's body. Rather than seeing this as an out-of-body experience, we view it as *perceiving from the collective body*. The ability to perceive from a panoramic field awareness is the underpinning of connecting with not-yet-embodied knowing and supporting its manifestation as emergent embodied and explicit knowing.

Presencing Institute senior faculty member Marian Goodman describes what happens in moments of connecting with the knowing of the field in this way:

Something does slow down. The relationship to chronology and the sense of separateness completely shifts in experience. Something gets more primal if you like. So slowing down, a change of frequency, and a change of orientation. What you start paying attention to, or what starts getting your attention is different. There's a shift of focus, and I think that shift of focus is the interiority of the field. I think that's where your awareness goes to because there is this sense of loss of personal self, the small ego self, in space and time but an enlarging of presence in the slowdown. So, you're very much in time, because you're right now, and you very much in space, because you're right here. (Marian Goodman, 2023, Individual Interview)

While we have few concrete words and concepts with which to describe the fourth-person perspective, there is a familiarity in. It is a felt experience, rather than an emotional response to events, which would fall within the subjective realm. As described by both experienced social field practitioners and those new to the social field approach, the sensory nature of fourth-person knowing is experienced as qualitatively distinct from subjective experience that arises from within the boundaries of our own being.

Who I Am and What I Do Matters

3. Fourth-person knowing comes with a heightened sense of possibility in which a future potential, that was previously experienced as out of reach, moves inside the horizon of what feels doable and possible.

Connecting with fourth-person tends to result in a profound sense of empowerment as a new range of what is possible comes within reach. Nebojsa Illijevski, from North Macedonia, knows this phenomenon well. Having participated in Theory U capacity-building programs, Nebojsa had been working to integrate the framework and related practices into his work at Public, the Association for Research, Communication, and Development, where he and his colleagues publish a street paper, among other projects. The paper is sold by individuals who live in marginalized communities, thus creating employment for these individuals and groups. From this work, Public developed a social mentoring program that helps people who have had difficulty entering the labor market to do so. Public was in the process of developing this work when the pandemic began and Nebojsa joined the GAIA (Global Activation of Intention and Action). The initiative was launched by the Presencing Institute in March 2020 just as Covid-19 lockdowns, quarantines, and suspension of business-as-usual confronted the world with acute disruption. The initiative brought together a global community of over 15,000 change makers to sense into the moment of acute disruption and seed new possibilities from that place. Bi-weekly online gatherings included guest speakers, dialogue, and contemplative and social arts practices, which were complemented with asynchronous small-group processes in

self-organized Solidarity Circles. Reflecting on his experience and its impact on his own actions and agency, Nebojsa told us:

It felt like I was putting my mask down, you know, losing my persona, so I could come more authentically into the spaces where I was gathering with people. Since then, it feels like I have turned into a magnet that attracts the people I really want to be with. And that has led to really tangible results. I would say it's something that I can see. (Nebojsa Illijevski, 2023, Focus Group Reflection)

The tangible results Nebojsa mentions are significant. In the few short years since we met him in 2020, Public has expanded and brought the methodology from Macedonia to four other Balkan countries, supported by a partnership with GIZ (the German Agency for International Cooperation).

How do we understand the relationship between engaging with a generative social field and the activation of agency? Interestingly, the answer is reflected in Nebojsa's own words. During a journaling exercise, his focus group was invited to engage in some imagery work, focusing on GAIA as a social field. In the dialogue following the journaling exercise, Nebojsa shared, "If the social field of GAIA can speak, it says, 'It's open: pass.' The voice is not that gentle. It's a very determined voice. 'Pass, it's open.' It's a very clear calling" (Nebojsa Illijevski, 2020, Focus Group).

Nebojsa described his surprise that the voice that spoke to him in the journaling was not his own. It is this voice that we refer to as the fourth-person perspective. The specific message from the social field is a future-oriented form of knowing that connects us to a sense of possibility with which we can choose to engage (or not). Hodgson (2013) describes the present moment as a pattern of actual and latent experiences and our experience of the present moment as varying with our state of consciousness. While the present moment can be *thin*, meaning of short duration or with a narrow range of awareness, it can also be *thick*, "where we embrace the entire field of our concerns and do so through an expansion of our awareness range" (p. 29).

Elizabeth Gilbert beautifully describes the experience of the thick present and the consequent relationship we have with the calling of an idea that wants to manifest. She says, "The simplest answer, of course, is just to say no. Then you're off the hook. The idea will eventually go away...you don't have to do anything." (Gilbert, 2016, p. 37). The alternative, of course, is to say yes. In the face of this response, Gilbert says, "Now your job becomes both simple and difficult. You have officially entered into a contract with inspiration, and you must try to see it through, all the way to its impossible-to-predict outcome" (Gilbert, 2016, p. 38). So the experience of fourth-person knowing is about entering into partnership with the beingness of the social field. It is an intimate relationship, and it brings agency within reach because there is a calling to which you choose to give yourself (even though you don't know what it will lead you to). Beth Jandernoa reflects further:

It seems to me as though this inner collective holds real promise for what the world or life is calling for. It's the edge or dynamic frontier that holds some kind of key that taps into a creative realm that is always present, but we don't access it very often because it is clouded by our usual consciousness. (Beth Jandernoa, 2022, Circle of Seven Interview)

In connecting with fourth-person knowing, we become aware of a larger presence holding us. It was always there but beyond our attention and it calls us toward action. We depend on it and it depends on us.

Whole-in-the-Parts and Parts-in-the-Whole

4. Fourth-person knowing tends to manifest with an enhanced co-presence of the whole and the individual, making available the possibility and freedom to align individual and collective attention, intention, and agency.

Fourth-person knowing is born of the intimate relationship between individual and collective intention and attention. It tends to surface through co-presencing experiences in which individuals experience themselves in the whole and simultaneously experience the whole within themselves. Through this experience of whole-in-the individual and individual-in-the-whole, individuals can gain a heightened sense of their own place, and with it the freedom to exercise agency that aligns with a shared intention and attention.

To illustrate the intertwined relationship between individual and collective agency and intention, we turn once again to our experience of the pandemic-response initiative, GAIA. Throughout the three-month process, we collected data on the participants' experiences through surveys, focus groups, and dialogic sense making of the results. (Pomeroy et al., 2021). We draw on that data here.

In the first instance, as individuals encounter the shared intention of a collective, they are often able to see a greater whole and hold this whole in their awareness. Participants commented:

I feel more centered and [can] "focus on a wider plane." (GAIA Final Survey)

Seeing and hearing from all over the world gave me a sense of the global scale of this kind of engagement, my body-heart-mind is part of a large evolutionary movement of body-heart-minds. (GAIA Final Survey)

These descriptions are not those of an outside observer, or a third-person perspective; rather, this expanding perception of the whole *includes* the observer. When people see themselves as a part of that community or ecosystem, something interesting and essential happens: they begin to see themselves through the lens of that whole. We hear this often. Consider this reflection from Luis Dominguez:

When the speaker was speaking last Friday, I made a connection with myself and with somebody that I love. I felt that what was happening in the session had something to do with me personally. (Luis Dominguez, 2020, GAIA Focus Group)

Taking the second statement into consideration, what or whose is the voice that led Luis to feel that the live session, with thousands of participants, had something to do with him personally? Clearly the speaker was not directing her comments to Luis specifically, so this experience was not about an interpersonal interaction or second-person, intersubjective knowing. Yet there was something happening that felt important and deeply personal, the source of which is difficult to pinpoint. *This* is what we recognize as fourth-person knowing. It is knowing that shows up in our personal experience but is not of us. Rather, it is sourced by the field and accessed through our individual and collective attention.

When people connect with fourth-person knowing and see themselves from the whole in this way, their relationship to the whole changes. Instead of losing themselves in a sense of oneness, people seem rather to see their individuality and dormant potential more clearly. Pedro Perez Guillon, a GAIA participant from Chile, expressed it in this way:

I saw in others my own dreams, and it made me realize that these are collective forces shaping our common futures. I felt like a seed at the arrival of spring...feeling the magnetic pull of collective blooming. This gave me a great sense of trust in this inner force that wants to emerge in all of us. As a natural, organic, regenerative force that reshapes ourselves, our work and our culture. (Pedro Perez Guillon, 2020, Personal Communication)

Developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello (2022) describes the characteristics of human agency that make us distinct in the evolutionary line. He tracks the evolution of agency from the goal-directed agency of lizards through the intentional agency of mammals to the rational agency of large apes. The evolutionary step in this lineage that distinguishes humans from other species is our capacity to enter into shared agency. Tomasello (2022) writes,

Early humans thus for the first time began putting their rational heads together with a partner to form a joint agent to pursue a joint goal together. These collaborative activities were dual level in the sense that they comprised a shared level of joint goals and joint attention, on the one hand, and an individual level of individual roles and individual perspectives, on the other. We might think of these as two *modes* of agency. (p. 101)

So, the distinct characteristic of human agency is our ability to align our goals and attention collectively or, put another way, to create shared fields of intention and attention. We have the capacity to enter into shared agency and co-shape our future in a way that other species do not, and we experience individual agency in relation to this shared agency.

What is essential here and what distinguishes fourth-person knowing from other, more malevolent forms of collective experience, such as groupthink (Janis, 1997) or incohesion (Hopper, 2009)³ is *the freedom to choose to enter into collective attention and intention*. This is a hallmark of fourth-person knowing: it is not manipulative. Rather, having gained a heightened sense of the whole and my place in it, I can choose to make myself available for what wants to move through me. The experience is one of simultaneous agency and surrender. Buber (1970) writes, “The You [social field] encounters me. But I enter into direct relationship to it. Thus, the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once” (p. 62). Aboriginal scholar and artist Tyson Yunkaporta, of the Apalech Clan, Queensland, describes the relationship between individual and collective agency in this way:

You must allow yourself to be transformed through your interactions with other agents and the knowledge that passes through you from them. This knowledge and energy will flow through the entire system in feedback loops, and you must be prepared to change so that those feedback loops are not blocked. (Yunkaporta, 2020, p. 87)

And just as an encounter with the social field changes us, so do we change it.

“Shockingly Effective”

5. Fourth-person knowing tends to activate longer-term generative social fields that give rise to sustained and significant practical results.

One of the ways we felt we could come to know the fourth-person perspective in the data and in our own experience was through its impact. As reflected in Nebojsa’s story, connecting with the experiences described in the points above is accompanied surprisingly often by a profound shift in the way people collaborate and the practical results they produce. In the words of psychologist Eleanor Rosch, “action from awareness... can be shockingly effective” (see Scharmer, 2016, p. 166).

One such experience was the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Leadership Lab in Liberia. Co-designed by UN leaders and the Presencing Institute, the lab brought together leaders of the 25 UN agencies in Liberia (the UN Country Team), members of civil society and government officials, online and in person, between October 2022 and January 2023. Together they moved through a facilitated process of awareness-based systems change. Interested in better understanding the experience of the lab and its impact, the facilitation team engaged in an inquiry process, first through their own structured reflection,

³ See Bockler (2023) for a full discussion of the shadow side of groups.

then through interviews and focus groups (see Table 2). In summarizing their own experience, the team—Liz Alperin Solms, Teo Iordache and Sharon Munyaka—shared,

From the lab’s outset, we experienced flow and awe and “just-rightness” and the felt sense that it just might be transformational. This is not to say all was perfect. All was not perfect. The challenges in Liberia are immense: the poverty, the corruption, the deep wound of 20 years of war, the lack of infrastructure. But we felt drawn into an ecosystem that had a felt sense of “readiness,” and there was a sense of flow or “being guided” through the six months of the Lab. (Liberia SDG Leadership Lab Facilitation Team, 2023, Action Inquiry Reflection)

While the program itself was relatively short, the prototypes that emerged from the lab are striking for their significance and scale. They include:

- “Initiation without Mutilation” emerged as a prototype working with local leaders and wisdom figures to replace female genital mutilation (FGM) with alternative cultural practices that honor rites of passage and the associated social and economic structures.
- The “We Are One Liberia” public relations campaign was created to engage civic society and public personalities to promote a common, positive Liberian identity in advance of an upcoming national election. The 2023 elections were heralded as an overwhelming success, marking a peaceful transition of power in a country historically plagued by coups and political unrest.
- A UN Hub was created in a region of the country cut off much of the year by impassable road conditions, allowing resources to be allocated and directed through local decision making rather than nationally.

Perhaps the greatest impact from the lab wasn’t the initiatives that sprang from it but rather the shift leaders experienced in their perceptions of themselves and their role. The head of one agency shared that she came to understand that, by walking around in the morning before work and having coffee with the agency’s drivers, she’s doing the important work of sensing what’s needed. A senior official from the evaluation office instinctively recognized that he couldn’t do yet another country assessment by sitting in his office reading research reports, and instead immediately set out to talk with relevant colleagues in other UN agencies, and individuals from both civil society and government. And the head of UN Women opened the agency’s work so that community groups, NGOs, women’s groups and local government can participate in planning, leading and

implementation of initiatives. One young member of civil society and a leader in the international NGO community said:

Personally I realize I want to do something at a higher level to have more access to influence change. I see the potential to do that, and I wouldn't have had access to that information. I wouldn't have been able to imagine that I could influence change at a country or national level. But I have. That's something to be proud of and to work towards. (Aisha Lai, 2023, Liberia SDG Leadership Lab Action Inquiry)

All of these initiatives and shifts emerged from an experience involving just 30 cross-agency leaders over the course of roughly six months. How is that possible? Liberia's UN Resident Coordinator reflected on the effect of aligning collective attention and intention. In referring to a "system mapping" exercise that uses embodiment to support the sensing of the system, he noted:

It was a feeling that there was an ecosystem (to use an overused phrase), which actually enabled people to understand that they all had an importance, and their absence in terms of commitment would have been difficult. That stood out very clearly for me at the time. (Niels Scott, 2023, Liberia SDG Leadership Lab Action Inquiry)

Through the lab experience, a way of knowing and understanding the system and one's place in it becomes available where it hadn't been before. We argue that this knowing catalyzes new action. The source of this knowing comes not from any one individual or group, nor from the facilitation team for that matter. Rather, it is a source of knowing that until now has been little named, yet is felt and recognized—it is knowing that is accessed rather than co-created. Facilitator Liz Alperin Solms shared this:

It felt as though we were on the precipice of what wanted to happen next—as if something was communicating with us. We had an existing plan, but it just became clear to us what had to happen. (Liz Solms, 2024, Personal Communication)

We maintain that fourth-person knowing, and the dormant potential it holds, is always available. While always present, however, it is not always evident. High-quality or generative social fields provide the conditions for making fourth-person knowing accessible.

Realigning Attention, Intention, and Agency

While we have articulated the five points above as separate and distinct for the purpose of illuminating their properties, in reality they are all aspects of a unified experience. What is the epistemological code and the deeper nature of that experience? In a book that dives more deeply into these experiences, it is characterized as having the following two epistemological turns:

1. Attention, if deepened, gives rise to Intention.
2. Intention, if deepened, gives rise to agency.

(Scharmer & Kaufer, *forthcoming*)

The journey down the left-hand side of the U is essentially about the first principle: deepening the understanding of the relevant multiple perspectives in a social context in a way that gives rise to the underlying intentionality: not only what currently is but also the future that is wanting to emerge through us.

The first three features of fourth-person knowing refer to this first epistemological turn: attention giving rise to intention: (1) through me but not of me; (2) decentering my perception of time, space, sensation, and self; and (3) a heightened sense of possibility and potential that is inside my field of agency. The last two are more clearly connected to intention giving rise to agency: (4) co-presencing of the whole-in-the-individual and of the individual-in-the-whole, leading to shared context and alignment of intention, attention, and agency; and (5) significant long-term impact and practical results ('shockingly effective').

Toward an Epistemological Grounding for Societal Regeneration

In drawing the various loose ends together, we would like to end with four summary points.

First, we started this article with the proposition that the number one challenge of our time is not climate change, the falling apart of our societies, or the proliferation of artificial intelligence. The primary challenge we face is the widely shared sense, particularly among young people, that perhaps it is already too late to change course. We know what the problems are. We know what the solutions are. But we are not implementing them. This observation framed the backdrop of our inquiry: What would it take to address the massive knowing-doing gap that defines our current moment? In our view, what we need is to activate a form of knowledge and knowing that goes beyond the traditional constructs around which much of our learning, knowledge, and leadership systems are organized: fourth-person knowing. Although its articulation may be new, we have been working with this kind of knowing in large-scale transformation and ecosystem activation journeys for more than two decades and have experienced its effectiveness across contexts and geographies. We know it very well experientially, as do many practitioners of transformation processes, but because it doesn't fit any of the pre-existing categories of knowledge creation and learning we don't talk about it.

Second, this deeper level of knowing comes with a set of distinctive experiential properties. We described five of them here: (1) knowing that comes through me but is not of me; (2) decentering of perception, including time, space, sensation, and self; (3) a heightened sense of possibility and potential in which something that appeared to be unattainable suddenly is experienced as in reach;

(4) feeling your own agency in helping ‘the universe’ (the larger social field) to evolve (co-presencing of the whole-in-the-individual and vice versa); and (5) significant long term impact in terms of practical results (‘shockingly effective’). The list is not necessarily exhaustive, but it draws our attention to a deeper level of experience in complex processes of change that is usually not attended to because we lack a vocabulary for it.

Third, fourth- person knowing, the knowing of the field, can be learned. It is, in fact, already recognized by many. Ed Schein, in his work on organizational culture, gave language to that which was tacitly known but unarticulated in organizational life. He defined culture as “the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments,” and he notes that it is “one of the most powerful and stable forces operating in organizations” (Schein, 1996, p. 231). Here we similarly attempt to give language to that which is known but underarticulated. In our case, we look not so much at what culture *is*, but rather at what is inside its *making*—the beingness of the whole and the knowing that resides there. Given that many change makers and practitioners have had experiences of fourth-person knowing, the potential for it to become a central tenet of future learning, knowledge-creation and leadership is significant.

Fourth, we are clearly at the very beginning of exploring a new metacategory of thinking and acting that moves beyond the traditional forms of objective (third-person), subjective (first-person) and intersubjective (second-person) knowing, and that may give rise to more holistic attention, intention, and agency based on knowing that we tentatively framed as a fourth metacategory of trans-subjective or self-transcending knowing. The more we understand these deeper epistemological and ontological foundations, on which all the other forms of knowing tend to arise from and return to, the better our frameworks will serve the deeper evolutionary needs of our societies and our planet as we gradually shift from polycrisis and collective depression to polysystemic regeneration and collective agency.

Sherri Mitchell, Penawahpskek from the Penobscot Nation, writes,

As we move through these challenging times, it is important to remember that none of us are here by accident. We entered this world with the express purpose of facilitating the changes that are manifesting during this time, and we brought with us the gifts needed to accomplish that task. None of us are out of time or out of place, though many of us remain out of step with our true path. Our unique imprint is essential to the larger pattern that is unfolding. (Mitchell, 2018, p. xx)

It is our hope that by articulating and centering fourth-person knowing we can provide an epistemic basis for individuals and collectives to recognize, connect with, and manifest what is theirs to do—their “unique imprint”—within the wider pattern and movement arising in our current moment.

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