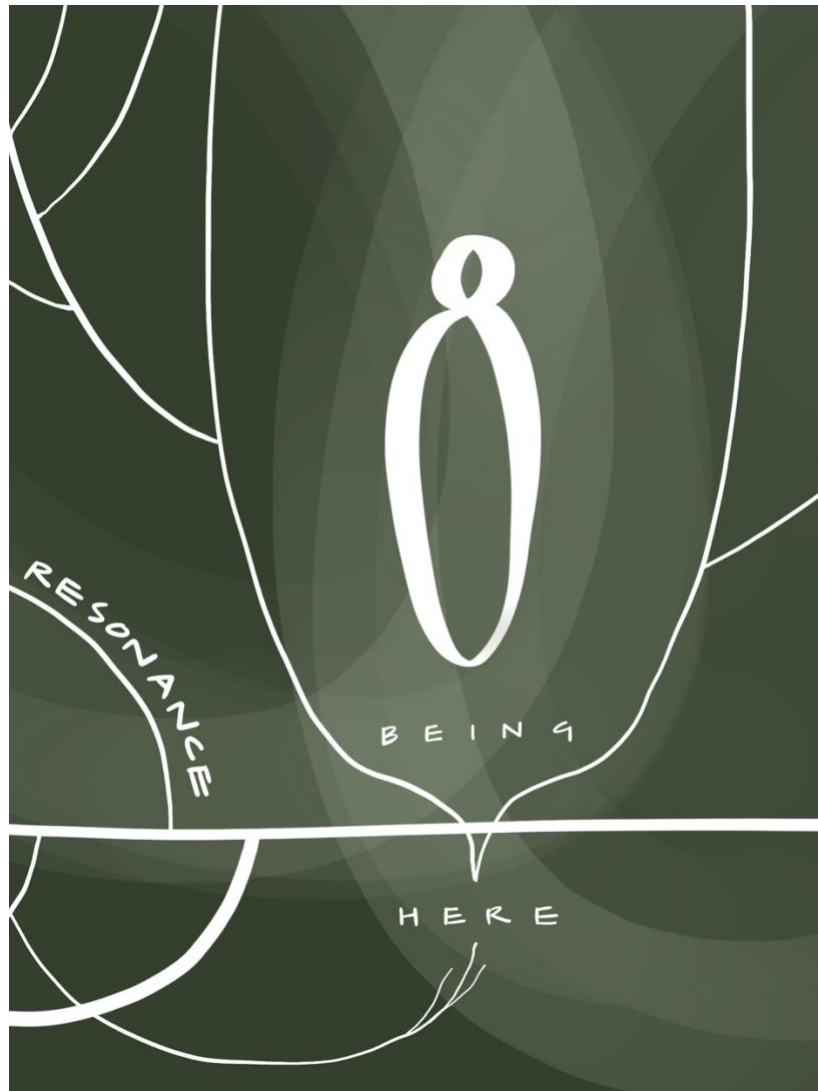


# Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change



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## Editorial

# Awareness-Based Systems Change

## Embedding in Place and Relationship

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Oliver Koenig, Eva Pomeroy, Megan Seneque, and Otto Scharmer

As a biannual journal, we have used and will continue to use the JASC Editorial as a time to take stock and bring our attention to the speed of the tectonic-like shifts that all too quickly fade in the busy-ness of our daily lives. Shortly after the release of our last issue in November 2022, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged from an insider tale to a mainstream phenomenon, enabling us to process vast amounts of data, generate insights, and facilitate communication at an unprecedented scale. As AI bursts onto the scene and into our consciousness, particularly with tools such as ChatGPT, we find ourselves caught between narratives of utopian idealizations of its potential and dystopian scenarios for our collective future. Even those involved in the development of AI predict its impact will range from extremely positive to extremely negative in nature (Stein-Perlman et al., 2022). “Aware” of its own inherited bias, ChatGPT answers a query when instructed to discuss its own pros and cons: “However, the rise of AI models also presents new challenges. The use of AI in decision-making must be accompanied by ethical considerations, transparency, and accountability. The potential for bias, the need for responsible data handling, and the risk of

exacerbating existing inequalities must all be addressed as we navigate the integration of AI models into our systems.” (ChatGPT, personal communication, May 24, 2023). As Awareness-Based Systems Change is beginning to emerge as a global and transdisciplinary community, we hold a subtle awareness that these new transformative, normative forces are already pervading our thinking and doing (De Gregorio, 2023), further prompting us to reflect on and act upon our innate human capacities and responsibilities.

At the same time AI has been entering into our professional and personal lives in surprising ways we, at JASC, have been involved in the ongoing work of clarifying and deepening our understanding of awareness-based systems change through our engagement with authors and articles. The theme that has surfaced for us most strongly in the past six months of preparing this issue has been *embeddedness*. This resonates strongly, with an astonishingly applicable critique of market liberalism, even if written almost eighty years ago. In his introduction to Karl Polanyi’s reprint of “The Great Transformation” (Polanyi, 1944/2001), Block writes about the profound contribution and foresight that Polanyi’s introduction of the concept and consequences of dis/embeddedness has had on understanding our current global state:

Polanyi argues that creating a fully self-regulating market economy requires that human beings and the natural environment be turned into pure commodities, which assures the destruction of both society and the natural environment. In his view the theorists of self-regulating markets and their allies are constantly pushing human societies to the edge of a precipice. But as the consequences of unrestrained markets become apparent, people resist; they refuse to act like lemmings marching over a cliff to their own destruction. Instead, they retreat from the tenets of market self-regulation to save society and nature from destruction. In this sense one might say that disembedding the market is similar to stretching a giant elastic band. Efforts to bring about greater autonomy of the market increase the tension level. With further stretching, either the band will snap—representing social disintegration—or the economy will revert to a more embedded position. (Block, 2001, p. xxv)

From an awareness-based systems change perspective, we equally see embeddedness as an integrative principle, applicable not only to our understanding of the effects of market forces but also to the non-tangible dimensions, domains, and qualities of human interaction and sense-making we refer to as social fields (Pomeroy & Hermann, 2023). The quality of relationships and relating that characterizes the social field is the leverage point for change that each contribution to this issue points toward across a variety of contexts.

Embeddedness might well be understood as the onto-epistemological counterpart to AI, since the knowledge (rather than knowing) generated through algorithmic protocols, albeit successful in simulating human-like interactions,

misses out on the human-to-human experiential and contextual understanding that is derived from lived and embodied experiences emerging from sustained (fields of) social practice and feeding back into it in order to support its flourishing. This is something we want to emphasize even further as we continue to evolve our journal.

Our first and still rudimentary axiomatic thoughts on embeddedness, see two defining characteristics as crucial for our understanding of awareness-based systems change: its spatial/place-based and relational/relationship-based properties. In our digital world, *place* can be virtual—a psycho-social or psycho-spiritual space with clear purpose, boundaries and membership—as described in Hillary Bradbury’s article in this issue. Often, however, awareness-based systems change is embedded in a physical, geographical place highlighting the importance of place-based and local solutions to addressing planetary challenges. The complexity and diversity of our crises demand context-specific approaches that not only honor but are embedded within the unique characteristics, needs, and knowledge systems of different regions and communities to develop and implement solutions that are deeply rooted in their specific social, cultural, and ecological contexts. Further, if we are to achieve any sort of epistemic justice (Anderson, 2012; Code, 2020), the knowledge emerging from action-in-place needs to be recognized by a greater whole, a point made in this issue explicitly in the *In Dialogue* article focusing on Ubuntu Institute, a pan-African initiative to build capacity for awareness-based systems change using Theory U, and implicitly through Chowdhury’s article, which brings the wisdom tradition of Shiva into dialogue with Western concepts of systemic leadership.

Interestingly, it has become a repeated observation that while many nations of the so-called Global North refute to nationalistic and protectionist agendas (e.g. Woods et al., 2020), the past years have seen a spatial shift in leadership for global causes to countries of the Global south (Pereira et al., 2020) and the recuperation of sources of neglected and silenced wisdom, creativity, and innovation. De Sousa Santos (2020) describes as “heterotopian imaginaries” (Weber, 2022) the post-abyssal democracies, which overcome the (abyssal) lines that have separated the “dominant” and the “marginalized” social groups and their knowledge systems and move towards ways of democratizing, decolonizing, decommodifying, and depatriarchalizing social relations and practices. Another way to think about this is that we aim to make visible place-based knowledge-in-action that already exists, but that has been discounted through hegemonic structures that organize and disseminate knowledge hierarchically.

Closely connected to the place-based property of embeddedness is the relational/relationship-based property. While AI works on extractivist and immensely energy-intensive operating principles, drawing information deemed to be relevant from sources indiscriminately, relationship requires discernment, and most of all, care and caring (for someone or something). According to Chagnon et al. (2022), extractivism is an egocentric concept that can be characterized as a “complex ensemble of self-reinforcing practices, mentalities,

and power differentials underwriting and rationalizing socio-ecologically destructive modes of organizing life through subjugation, violence, depletion, and non-reciprocity” (p. 760). Extractivism threatens the sustainability and well-being of both present and future generations and, in our current polycrisis, the limitations of this outdated leadership approach become ever more apparent.

The dawn of a post-pandemic era sees the world standing at a range of critical *ruptures*, a concept introduced by Mahanty et al. (2023) to capture the essence of this time of intense and punctuated change. The authors comment that “...ruptures happen in specific places” which then necessarily requires us to address relationship, particularly relationships of power,

Epistemologically, this emplaced starting point is significant because it enables us to grasp rupture’s interactive character: how changes relate in landscapes over time, across scales and between locations. This approach exposes how processes of commodification drive rupture through tangled material, social and political relationships. These insights are essential not just to grasping rupture’s causes and implications, but also the power asymmetries that we must contend with in any efforts towards transformative change. (Mahanty et al., 2023, p. 13)

Although ruptures can be far-reaching and transcend spatial boundaries, they do not necessarily follow a predetermined, destructive pathway. Rather, they also hold generative potential. Our current polycrisis-ridden global situation can also be seen as an “open moment’ where opportunities and risks multiply, new political and material claims are laid, and novel social-political pathways catalyzed” (Mahanty et al., 2023, p. 2).

In the face of ruptures across our natural, social, and political landscape, it is imperative that we shift our leadership paradigm from extractivist to regenerative leadership, organizations, and cultures (Wahl, 2016). As the ecocentric counterpart to extractivism, regenerative leadership and organizing are rooted in place-based and local solutions to global and planetary challenges (Muñoz & Branzi, 2021). As a foundational skillset necessary for maintaining (relational) agency while navigating the complex realities of our time, regenerative leadership is about cultivating a deep understanding of the interdependence between human and ecological systems to enable ourselves to stay within the limits of ethical and ecological boundaries (Heikkurinen et al., 2021).

One key aspect of regenerative leadership lies in the ability to let go of old models and rigid control and to “let come,” to create space for emergent future possibilities to unfold (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013). This requires a mindset shift from linear thinking to embracing complexity and uncertainty (Koenig et al., 2022). As we navigate the complex web of interrelated challenges, regenerative leadership offers a powerful framework. It enables us to shift from extraction to restoration, from competition to collaboration, and from short-term thinking to long-term stewardship. By embracing regenerative leadership, we can harness



the power of emergent possibilities, engage in place-based solutions, and co-create a future that is regenerative, just, and sustainable for all.

## Contributions of This Issue

Our issue opens with a tribute to one of the founding figures of Organizational Development and Board Member of JASC, Ed Schein, who passed away at age 94 early this year. Otto Scharmer describes the foundational influence Schein had on Theory U and the entire field of systems change by decentering and extending the individual awareness in process consultation, focusing on building helping relationships, and teaching more than one generation of consultants, facilitators, educators, and leaders that the primordial task in any effort to be helpful is to learn to access your ignorance, discomfort, and capacity to lean into what wants to emerge.

The original and peer-reviewed publications of this issue all, in different ways, take up the challenge of developing and engaging in these new forms of embedded leadership.

By introducing “Subtractive Awareness,” esteemed Editorial Board member Hilary Bradbury, and colleagues Chris Riedy, Susanna Carman, Susanne Pratt, Bem Le Hunte and Meghna Guhathakurta, coin a new transformation narrative of self that makes it possible to embody mutual collaborative practice with others. The concept is embedded within and emerges from her pioneering work in the global ActionResearch+ network, constituted in part by a series of coLABs—mostly virtual person-centered spaces as dynamos of good Action-oriented Research for Transformation (ART) in domains ranging from education to healthcare, to sustainable organizing. Through coLABs, Hilary Bradbury and others have made the observation of subtle, yet profound transformative shifts in CoLab participants’ thinking, being, and acting. Moving away from acquiring new and additional skillsets and tools, the CoLabs supported participants becoming aware of obstacles that were no longer fit for collaborative purposes and which inhibited creative action with others. In addition to introducing the concept of subtractive awareness and describing ways of scaffolding learning experiences to support such awareness, the article also serves as a strong counter-narrative to the still dominating growth paradigm and how it enfolds in and on us as humans.

Taking the notion of leading by letting go and letting come further and nesting it within Hindu mythology, Rajneesh Chowdhury utilizes the philosophy of Shiva, the god of destruction whose work allows for positive recreation, and blends it with approaches for systems leadership to build a conceptual framework for Conscious Systems Leadership. He asserts that such a consciousness-based framework, if developed and embodied, enables us to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation.

Interweaving between the outer and inner, Elisabeth Walsh and Jessica Abell introduce us to an intra- and inter-personal alignment tool, the Vitality Triangle, a framework to help navigate from the current Capitalocene towards just and flourishing futures. The framework is both practical and conceptual, having been inspired by diverse lineages of thought and action, as well as being shaped by the authors' introspection and experiences in community-based change initiatives. Embedded in the experience of an action research project in West Denver, USA, where residents grappled with the onset of the pandemic, the authors explore how three principles of regenerative vitality in living systems — liberty, reciprocity, and integrity can be applied individually as changemakers and can serve as a frame and decision-making tool for collective change.

As the second returning author of JASC, Victor Udoewa, with co-author Savannah Gress, further expands on approaches to design that replace extractivist and transactional methods with relational ones. After introducing what can be framed as a relational shift in design, they discuss the connection between systems and relationships and why Relational Design is important for positive systems change and impact. In a collaborative writing process that resembles the modern didactic principle of constructive alignment, they utilize dialogue as a means to discuss a specific relational methodology that they have used in the space of educational systems: a sustained dialogue framework.

As a regular feature, so with this issue we include *In Dialogue*, in this case taking us to the African continent and a dialogue between JASC's Associate Editor, Megan Seneque, and Ubuntu.Lab co-founders Aggie and Martin Kalungu-Banda and facilitator Sharon Munyaka to dive into their experiences co-creating and holding a Theory U-based learning journey informed by and embedded in Ubuntu philosophy. Picking up on the earlier theme from Mahanty et al. (2023) in relation to an emplaced or embedded view of rupture and the nature-society crisis, the dialogue explores the ways in which embodied ways of knowing and knowledge emerging from and embedded in local contexts can contribute to global movements.

This issue closes with our In the Making piece and its accompanying Discussant commentary. This issue's feature is born of the collaboration between researcher and professor of International Political Economy, Fernanda Cimini, and psychotherapist Maria Homen, who come together at the intersection of individual and systems change. In preparation for an action research project with cross-sector leaders in Brazil, they have developed a framework and approach called *Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation* (PFST), which aims to expand the theories of change (ToC) that underpins the current UN 2030 Agenda to include the less visible, less conscious dimensions of change through awareness-based systems change approaches. Discussant, Michelle Sampaio of the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), nests the piece in the context of the current decolonization agenda so important in the context of Latin America and Brazil. Through illuminative examples, Sampaio, like several authors in this issue, interweaves globally-applied change

frameworks with the specificity of place. In relation to Brazil, she draws on the nature-based solutions emerging from the unique socio-biocultural diversity of the region which are currently guiding and driving change.

The contributions to this issue have helped us to clarify and hone our own understanding of the nature and territory of awareness-based systems change. Each article in this issue provides an example of meeting the ruptures of our time, occurring in place and places with their specific social, political, historical and cultural context, and turning toward that rupture by leaning into and shifting relationship. By doing so, they provide living examples of the embedded, regenerative leadership that characterizes the nascent field of awareness-based systems change we are working together to bring fully into being.

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Commentary from the Field

# In Memory of Ed Schein

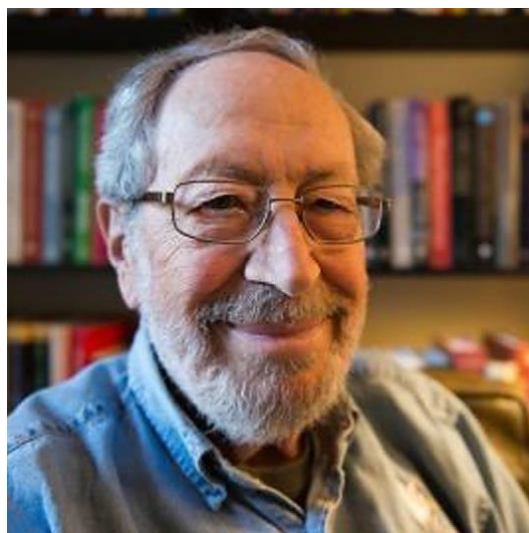
From Accessing Your Ignorance to Accessing Your Love

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Edgar H. Schein, Sloan Fellow professor of management emeritus at MIT, passed away on January 26, 2023, at the age of 94. Ed had an enormous impact on organizational development (OD), on Theory U, and on my life.



*Figure 1. Ed Schein (Shared with permission of Louisa Schein).*

Schein was born in Zurich on March 5, 1928. His father was a European Jew with a German name, a Hungarian national background, and a Czech citizenship who earned his PhD in physics at Zurich University, Switzerland. His mother, a Lutheran from Dresden, Germany, was also studying for a PhD in physics. In 1934, after Switzerland ended job opportunities for Czech citizens, including for his father, the family moved to Odessa. Having spoken only German at home, Ed learned to speak Russian when he started school. After Stalin dialed up Russification and Ukrainian suppression, Ed's father had the foresight to leave Odessa for Czechoslovakia, and then, realizing the immediate threat from Hitler, moved the family from there to Chicago, when Ed was 10.

After college, Ed, then a PhD student at Harvard's Department of Social Relations, entered the U.S. Army's clinical psychology program to avoid being drafted into the Korean War in the early 1950s and to garner funding for his research. In 1956, after earning his PhD, he was recruited to MIT by Douglas McGregor. Schein wrote dozens of books on social science subjects, including career dynamics, organizational culture, leadership, process consulting, and group dynamics. He is one of the most important founding fathers of organizational development (OD). His three-tiered model of organizational culture (Schein 2017) and his writings on building helping relationships (Schein 2010, 2013, 2014) are used by managers and change makers worldwide.

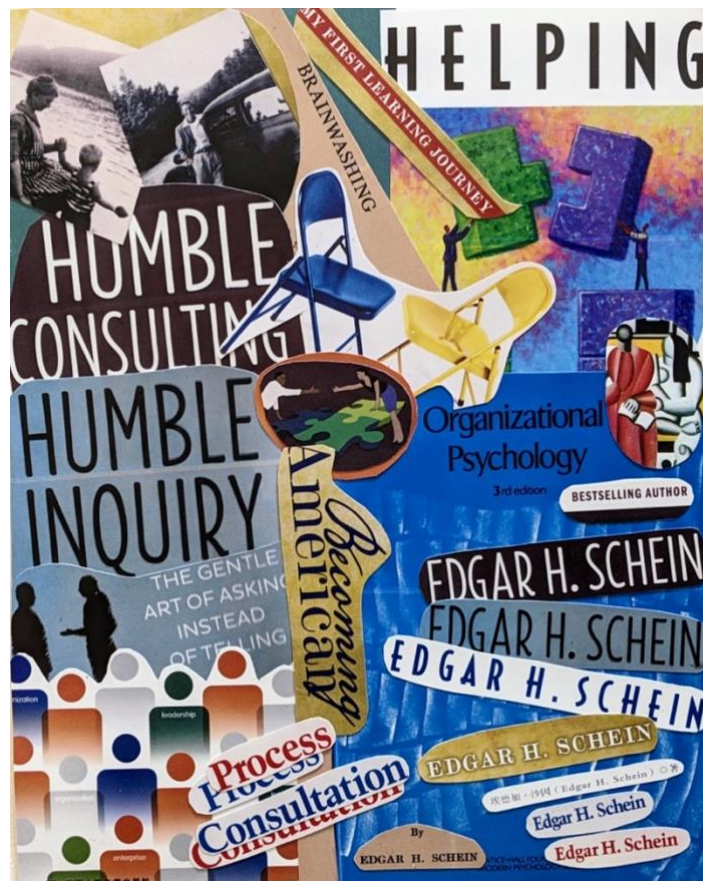


Figure 2. Collage by Louisa Schein on the occasion of Ed's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday (Source: L. Schein).

## The Teacher

I first met Ed when I arrived at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning in 1994. He taught a very popular class on change at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Taking that class was both eye-opening and life-changing for me. Ed had an amazingly minimalist teaching style. He did not give lengthy lectures. He never used a superfluous word.

Ed the teacher inverted the relationship between learner and educator. Normally that relationship is based on the professor knowing things that the students don't, a learning structure in which the professor conveys information and insights through lectures, discussions, and readings. But in Ed's classes the relationship between learner and educator was based on what *learners know without realizing it*, a learning structure in which the educator coaches the learner on how to access those deeper layers of knowing.

"You cannot learn how to manage change unless you do it." That's how he opened his first class, putting the students into the driver's seat of change. The students were in charge of advancing their own change initiatives, while the educator supported that process by providing appropriate methods and tools. It was unlike anything I had previously experienced in the classroom. In other words, Ed 100% embodied his own theory of process consultation in the way he reshaped his relationship to the students, to the class.

That was the eye-opening part. The life-changing part came when he offered me the chance to teach one section of the class. Because the class attracted so many students, and Ed insisted on keeping the class size to 30, he offered four sections, three taught by him and the fourth by me. I don't know what prompted him to offer that opportunity to me, but I guess he must have seen or sensed a potential or possibility. So, the way he taught me was by putting me into the role of the teacher. The way he coached me was by putting me into the role of the coach. You can't learn real stuff unless you do it...

## Schein's Influence on Theory U

Ed's inverted pedagogy and insights on how to engage in any kind of helping relationship made him my most important teacher as I advised clients and stakeholder groups on how to rethink challenges facing their organizations and communities. He should be considered not only a founding father of OD but also of Theory U. You can see the Schein influence on at least three levels.

First, Ed's three-tiered approach to organizational culture works like the iceberg model in systems thinking, from the more visible layers at the surface (tangible artifacts) to the deeper and less visible layers beneath (taken-for-granted assumptions).

Theory U follows that same intuition and identifies four relationship levels (that apply to different qualities of listening, conversation, organizing, or

coordinating) that each embody a different quality of awareness and consciousness.

Second, Ed's teaching on change emphasized creating psychological safety. Theory U follows that emphasis by spelling out various types of sensing and co-sensing practices.

Third and most important, Ed's work and teaching have helped me and many others be more helpful and useful in the context of organizational change, consulting, and leadership. Here are the most important principles that Ed returned to repeatedly in his MIT classroom.

### **1. "Always be helpful."**

This principle is foundational in all helping, coaching, consulting, and therapeutic professions. Unless you build a helping relationship, nothing else you do will be of much use. Writing these words today, I can clearly see the line of connection from ego to eco awareness in Theory U provided by the lesson to "always be helpful."

### **2. "Always deal with reality."**

Ed elaborates: "I cannot be helpful if I cannot decipher what is going on in myself, in the situation, and in the client." In other words, we need a good read on the situational reality. In Theory U this principle is reflected in the primacy of seeing, sensing, and co-sensing. Theory U is not based on juxtaposing the existing reality with our vision and then forcing one to apply to the other. Instead, it focuses on building the capacity to decipher what emerges—and what wants to emerge—and to co-create with these nascent forces.

### **3. "Access your Ignorance."**

This is probably the single most useful piece of advice I have ever gotten. When you are in professional helping situations—consulting, coaching, leading, teaming, partnering—framing questions from your not-knowing ("ignorance") rather than from your knowing ("expertise") are always more helpful.

"Access your ignorance" is a hands-on articulation of what in Theory U is referred to as having an Open Mind (curiosity). It directs your attention to the edges of your knowing—to your not-knowing. It de-centers your thought experience from areas of knowledge and certainty to not-knowing and being less sure.

In Theory U this *decentering* is expanded to two additional arenas of the human experience:

- Open Heart. Having an Open Heart refers to the decentering of our feelings (from the subjective to the intersubjective to the deep-intersubjective realm)—i.e., from feeling inside our subjective comfort zone to going to the edges of it, to sensing into the experiences of others and of the collective. Maybe Ed



would have referred to this kind of opening as “accessing your discomfort” or “accessing your heart.”

- Open Will. Having an Open Will refers to the decentering of our intentions and actions. It’s essentially about the capacity for navigating letting-go and letting-come, about surrendering to what wants to happen. Maybe Ed would have referred to it as “accessing your letting-go.” He did occasionally talk about a related principle that he termed “go with the flow,” which meant not holding tightly to plans, ideas, and intentions of the past, but rather always staying open to how a situation unfolds.

Another of Ed’s classic teaching points around the opening and decentering of the mind was, “when in doubt, share the problem.” It’s practical, succinct, and embodies decentering, which in this case means to shift the conversation from your head (should we proceed with plan A or plan B?) to a conversation with your group or client, whose context is more likely to inform the right choice or decision.

#### **4. “Everything You Do Is an Intervention.”**

This is another key principle that Ed liked to point out. In contrast to the traditional sequence of diagnosis followed by intervention, Ed said that everything we do, including diagnostic activities, is already an intervention in the existing system.

#### **5. “Everything You Experience Is Data.”**

We live in a data-driven economy. Data is what drives the success or failure of companies, regions, and economies. This generally refers to third-person data, the stuff you observe. Ed had a different take. As a social scientist and an action researcher, he believed it was of the utmost importance to pay attention to *all* the data we encounter and experience, including first-person and second-person data.

In Theory U-related work we pay a lot of attention to improving our methods and tools for accessing first- and second-person experiences. Cognitive scientist Francisco Varela once told me that in the West we have a blind spot in cognition science. That blind spot isn’t that we don’t know enough about the brain. The blind spot is about experience—how experience enters into our awareness. He said that we need to become “black belts” in accessing our first-person experiences. That’s the lineage that Theory U research connects with. And that’s why Ed’s principle that “everything we experience is data” matters.

To advance this research we co-founded the *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change*. Ed was a founding member of the editorial board. Here are his own words from an email he wrote to the board on his role and point of view:

“I come from a research in psychology career and have come to realize that the clinical psychologists who designed many of these

behavioral programs are themselves stuck in a culture of individualism and put a greater value on statistical studies that show some correlation between doing the programs and some mental health outcomes, while I have become convinced that the important changes that we are collectively seeking have more to do with the interaction of (a) the requirements of the situation we are in with (b) our conscious choices of how we will want to deal with that situation.

I say all of this to make it clear that my role on this board would be to continue to push that human systems are different, require different kinds of research and inquiry methods, they do not lend themselves well to quantitative and statistical research models, and rely much more on detailed case descriptions and structural models that are more metaphorical than physical. I have made an effort to describe what I call the clinical research method, which is to realize that we learn the most about how human systems really work when we have been in a consulting relationship where we were trying to be helpful. Perhaps the most profound thing that Kurt Lewin said about this is that ‘we don’t really understand a system until we try to change it.’”

He concludes his email by referencing an initiative that he launched on mobilizing fellow social scientists to address the global environmental challenges of our time by using OD and social change tools to build deeper collaboration capacities (Bartunek, 2022).

## Call for Collective Action

Writing this piece on Ed has had an interesting impact on me. It has made me think more about some of the deeper layers of relationship that play into all human connections—between student and teacher, between mentor and mentee. Perhaps the most significant level is the simple fact of being seen. Being seen for who you really are, for what you are trying to do. Even though Ed and I never spoke extensively about my work in most of our meetings, I always had the feeling that he saw me and what I was trying to do. And everyone who has lived in a context of *not* being seen knows how critical this is when it is missing (the complete absence of being seen can be felt as a type of violence: *attentional violence*).

At MIT, Ed was perhaps the first one who really saw me. What makes me say this? At first, it was just a feeling. But in the past two years, that feeling became more clarified, particularly when Ed talked about what we needed to do in the decades ahead.

What was most important to Ed were always the practical applications of the methods and tools we develop—and how to bring them to scale. For example, when I shared the Presencing Institute’s most recent annual report with him, he

said, “I am absolutely blown away by all you and your team have been able to accomplish.” It was not just projects that achieved organizational or structural change that drew his interest, but their relationship to the interior shifts in awareness necessary for true transformation to occur.

In some recent public remarks, Ed summarized his views on Theory U and the work that has grown out of the Presencing Institute. On that occasion, Ed addressed me more personally as the recipient of an award from the OD Network, but since his words focused on what needs to be done collectively going forward, they should really be read as addressing the whole movement of Theory U-inspired systems change:

“As I’ve known you over the years, I have come to believe that not only are you one of the important theoreticians and practitioners who has brought us this far in the social science of humanization, but more importantly I really believe you [all] are our best hope for the future.... The thing that I most admire about you, and that I think will produce great results in the future, is that you work as a kind of integrator of both the intellectual side and the emotional side, and most importantly the action side: what we will actually do, what our *Will* will tell us to do.

I think this is now especially important because the environmental problem of global warming is very serious, and unless humanity figures out a different way to think, talk, and act about it, we will indeed fry together on a hot planet.

So I’m counting on you [all] to help us change our consciousness, our feelings, and our actions to keep us alive on this wonderful planet. I’m so proud that you are continuing to work on this!”

## Access Your Love

On the last day of his life, Ed worked until 5 p.m. with his son Peter, before peacefully passing on in the evening hours. In his last Zoom call that afternoon Ed led a 2½-hour online session with the OD Network. He concluded that call with a farewell that I had not heard him express explicitly before, but that I had often felt he embodied in his actions and relationships, particularly in the later years.

“Love is what we bring to our clients. All the good we do comes from love.” Then he closed his remarks with “Enough said.”

Maybe that’s Ed’s journey and work in a nutshell: from *accessing your ignorance* to *accessing your love*.

Thank you, Ed, for embodying everything you taught me over the years—and for inspiring so many of us to continue the pioneering work you and your colleagues started in the 1950s and that since then has been joined and co-

evolved by so many others and has been reshaping the thinking and practice of organizational leadership, learning and change across the world.

Your final words to us—“I’m counting on you to help us change our consciousness, our feelings, and our actions to keep us alive on this wonderful planet”—were heard. They resonate profoundly. They will live on and increasingly resound in an emerging movement of change makers who use awareness-based practices to advance planetary healing and civilizational regeneration worldwide.

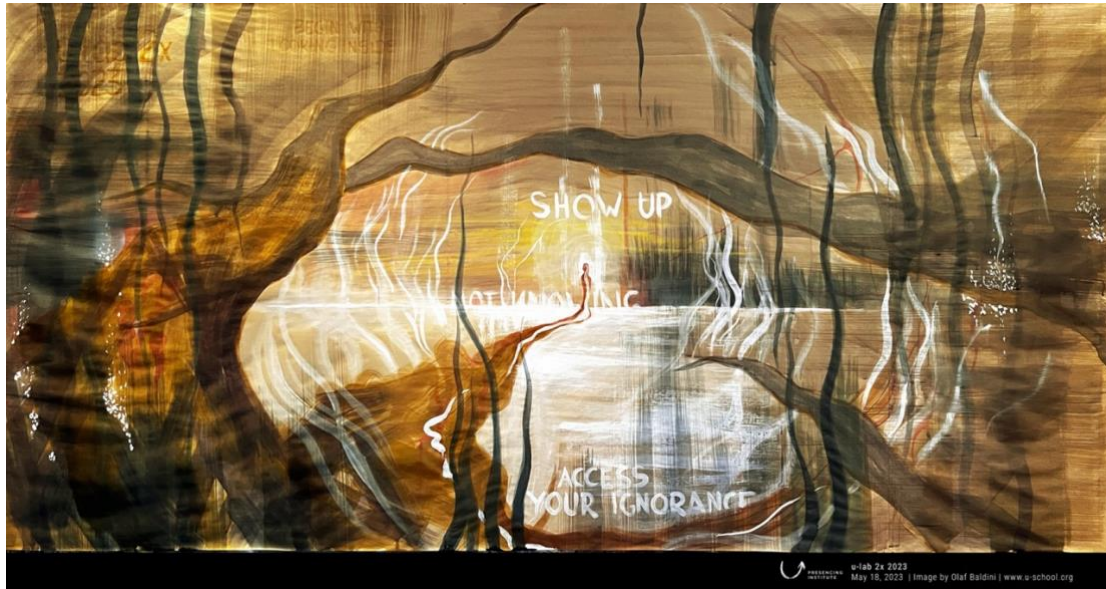


Figure 3. Ed’s teachings such as “accessing your ignorance” live on in u-lab’s worldwide ecosystem of change (captured through the visual artwork of O. Baldini, 2023)  
(Source: u-school for Transformation<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.u-school.org/>

Peer Review Article

# Subtractive Awareness:

## Educator-Change Leaders Helping Transformations Happen Together

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### Abstract

This paper is foremost about experiments in embodying a transformative narrative of a self that makes possible mutual collaborative practice with others. The focus is less on what we ought to think or do, but rather on subtracting, letting go, self-identities that are no longer fit for collaborative purpose. We refer to this as subtractive awareness by which we mean becoming aware of obstacles that inhibit creative action with others. In a time when dominant narratives call for endless growth, accumulation and addition, there is perhaps an overlooked value in subtraction practiced in support of collaboration. We align with writers such as Jason Hickel (2020), and practitioners in the degrowth movement to argue that in an era of perpetual expansion, “less is more.”

### Keywords

action research transformations, adult vertical development, embodiment, interdependence, narrative, reflexivity, relational, power-with

*Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps for it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control. Coercive power is the curse of the universe, coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul.*

—Mary Parker Follet

## Introduction: Why Do We Need Subtractive Awareness?

Ours is a time of intersecting eco-social crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and mass refugee migration. Along with a recent re-arising of nationalism, a simultaneously globalizing yet increasingly polarizing world is appearing. Whole societies are called to transition toward new levels of inclusion at speed and scale as a post-fossil fuel era arrives. Sustainability thought leaders call this transition the Great Turning (Korten, 2007; Macy 2009), explained also as an epochal shift from industrial modernity to postindustrial metamodernity (Freinacht, 2017). To support this Great Turning, many more politicians will have to advocate for sustainable policy and many more citizens will have to live according to sustainable principles. Neither is supported by current reward systems in which, for example, price signals do not point to true costs and intergenerational justice is increasingly compromised. Neither is supported by dominant narratives that promote human separation from nature, capital accumulation, and endless growth. The global transformation that may well be technologically feasible is surely socially and culturally daunting. Political inertia continues. We need personal and collective narratives that support mutual transformation towards a next level of collaborative action at all levels of society. Our opening quote signals our attention to the particular importance of transforming the individualistic narratives and patterns of relational dominance that we have inherited.

This paper is foremost about experiments in embodying a transformative narrative of a self that makes possible mutual collaborative practice with others. The focus is less on what we ought to think or do, but rather on subtracting, letting go of, self-identities that are no longer fit for collaborative purpose. We refer to this as *subtractive awareness* by which we mean becoming aware of obstacles that inhibit creative action with others. In a time when dominant narratives call for endless growth, accumulation, and addition, there is perhaps an overlooked value in subtraction practiced in support of collaboration. We align with writers such as Jason Hickel (2020) and practitioners in the degrowth movement to argue that in an era of perpetual expansion, “less is more.”

## Experimenting Together

The work described in the paper is drawn from a coLAB, i.e., a community of inquiry *and* practice that invites and supports participants to develop capacity *with* others around the world. The coLAB we describe is one of several organized

annually by the Action Research Plus AR+ Foundation. These coLABs are an extended engagement that can run for almost a year. The vignettes reported later in the paper emerged from a 2022 coLAB designed to experiment with the contributions that narrative theory and storytelling practice can make to processes of action research for transformations. Per the norms of the AR+ Foundation, a group of members conceived the coLAB and then offered an open invitation to others to participate. A dozen interested participants signed up, from the Global South (e.g., Bangladesh and Philippines) and Global North (e.g. Australia, Denmark, UK). Participants were educator change leaders who knew to expect emphasis on making meaningful experiments in their lives/work at three levels of focus, namely their own *personal* understanding of action research for transformations with an invitation to step to their developmental edge; their *interpersonal* practices with power, feedback and relationship building; and connecting to *the world* of work outside the coLAB, primarily through useful cognitive resources such as narrative (e.g., Hero/ine's journey) and research on adult development.

This coLAB may be considered part of multiple global efforts to support educator change leaders in catalyzing their own communities of students and clients to respond to the eco-social crisis of our time (Bradbury, 2022). In our era of Zoom, we see the possibility of supporting a population of educator change leaders across global boundaries.

## Our Use of the Term Subtractive Awareness

The use of the term subtractive awareness first emerged from reflection as participants on our own practice, through a lens of adult development. Emerging initially from a discussion about “needing to let old narratives die,” the concept started to take shape over the months of the coLAB as we reflected on the analogous way that sculptors work with negative space, seeking to chip away what is not needed to uncover the form and beauty within. A more formal search of the literature pointed us to the use of the term in design, education, and futures studies. There the term subtractive education crops up among linguists to refer to the ‘stripping’ of Indigenous languages from children so they fit into colonized education, a practice we do not condone. We saw more overlap with work by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2015) who describe neurodiverse forms of experience, albeit concerned with modes of individual perception. In contrast we see subtractive awareness as relational, i.e., born from the realization of exchange among people and in turn aimed at intersubjective awareness emanating from interior attunement; it is frequently engagement with the life-worlds of others that helps us to identify of what we can (and ought to) let go. We appreciated Nassim Taleb (2012) on ‘subtractive epistemology’ when he writes that the greatest and most robust contribution to knowledge consists in removing what we think is wrong. Also, Adams et al. (2021, p. 258) who further contrast additive and subtractive changes for improving objects, ideas or situations. They challenge our social default tendency towards additive

approaches that lead to “overburdened minds and schedules, increasing red tape in institutions and humanity’s encroachment on the safe operating conditions for life on Earth” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 261). They argue further that “if people default to adequate additive transformations—without considering comparable (and sometimes superior) subtractive alternatives—they may be missing opportunities to make their lives more fulfilling, their institutions more effective and their planet more livable.” It is this questioning of default additive tendencies and the importance of considering subtraction, that we now turn to in more detail.

For us, as action researchers, the active element in subtractive awareness is useful for signaling that it takes active *practicing* to release unhelpful cognitions. While simple to understand—the idea is simply to give up an idea—it is rare for the typical mind, whose natural negativity bias orients toward adding self-protective reasoning. A common example concerns managing the tension we feel between wanting to contribute our individual expertise into a collaborative workshop and wanting to remain open to potential co-created insights that emerge when working with others. Subtractive awareness is therefore complex; it is not just cognitive in terms of acquiring facts but is concerned with a new way of being with others. Rather than adding new knowledge for the self, it transforms blindspots of cherished self-identity through dissolution, the subtraction of which invites a more creative way of being with others. This kind of awareness combines a reflective capacity (we might say ‘awareness of awareness’) with capacity for collaborative action. In the language of action researcher Bjørn Gustavsen (2014), we move from wanting, individually, to be ‘very right,’ to instead practicing being collaborative together because beneficial social impact justifies its knowledge claims.

Subtractive awareness may effectively contribute to *scaffolding* among educator change-leaders. In the context of education, scaffolding (Bruner, 1984) refers to ways in which people teach and learn to develop necessary capacities in group settings. Just as builders use scaffolding to provide support when needed, but then remove that support, so educators “need to provide temporary supporting structures to assist learners to develop new understandings, new concepts, and new abilities” (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 8). As learners develop new skills, the support can be gradually removed. For action-oriented educators and change leaders this means working to create conditions in which people gradually ‘step up’ their leadership efforts in a synergistic way.

The contribution of this paper emphasizes 1) the insights of constructivist adult development to 2) highlight the concept and practice of what we term subtractive awareness, as 3) a means for scaffolding groups in ongoing development of self and collective. The concept of subtractive awareness is therefore offered for its potential in emancipating a multiplier effect among educator change-leaders.

In linking narrative insight, adult development and collaborative action, subtractive awareness contributes to the lineage of action research with its



emphasis on integrating inquiry with action for practical impact that benefits stakeholders, human and other, more than human (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Bradbury, 2015). There has been success before with scaffolding capacity for large populations based on action oriented developmental education, e.g., Andersen and Björkman (2017) describe the Nordic ‘secret’ of providing access to developmental and action-oriented education in the Scandinavian region. The project was state funded during the European Industrial revolution at a time when this erstwhile resource-poor region had to meet the complexities of urban modernity. It succeeded. That government funded effort made personal development opportunities available to all adults *beyond* formal school years. This took the form of popular adult education, *Volksbildung*—a derivate of the European Adult Education Institutions—an historic achievement in European welfare states. Global surveys, e.g., World Happiness report, point to the Nordic region as home to the most prosperous and happy people on the planet.<sup>1</sup>

Subtractive awareness as we present it is practiced most effectively by advanced adult learners, i.e., those who often inhabit the role of educator and change leader. Importantly they develop this capacity after they have successfully built an identity as independent contributors (self-authoring, in the language of adult development —see below). It necessitates stepping into the unknown with others, thus requiring:

- Growing from individual expert to partners in collaborative action;
- Learning to support others in collective decision making and shared accountability;
- Entertaining perspectives diverse enough to provoke reflection and clarity about what matters most of all for us.

Next, we unpack the theory of constructivist adult development to explain what we mean by ‘advanced adult learner/change leader.’ This is followed by narratives that illustrate our work to date.

## Constructivist Adult Development

Foremost in the modern approach to adult development is Jean Piaget (1962) who proposed an invariant sequence of stages through which children develop. This insight has been empirically elaborated by scholars of development in a variety of fields, as it applies also to adults, see Michael Commons, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Robert Kegan, Jane Loevinger, William R. Torbert and Ken Wilber and colleagues. Our work is anchored in the ongoing empirical study of constructivist adult development by Jane Loevinger (1966, 1976), known for her

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<sup>1</sup> Danish action researcher Miles Horton was a key figure in linking action research from Global North with the Global South at the Highlander Center.

assessment of ego development, and the more recent work of Robert Kegan (1988). At this time of writing, as the theory emerges from its nuanced academic context into practice especially among change leadership executives, critique surrounds the explicitly stage-like conception of development. The critiques take aim at the notion that stages that emerge later in a developmental process are to be understood as hierarchically elitist.

Engaging fully with this critique lies beyond this paper. We note however the nature of development is to build on previous stages to solve new problems and therefore later stages of development *are* more capable in certain measurable ways than earlier stages of development. Yet this does not mean that later stages of development should be treated as superior. Consciousness at later stages grapples with ever new problems and fallibilities. Therefore, it's important to point to a paradox that is often overlooked by the critics. Namely, that it is only at later stages that deeper levels of human collaboration and creativity become possible (Torbert, 2004, 2020). One of the most frequently observed developmental trajectories, from Piaget onwards, is an expansion in the entities that we recognize as having value, from self to family to tribe and onwards (Cook-Greuter, 2013). This expansion of our circle of care opens new possibilities for collaboration by helping us to value more perspectives—to be less elitist. An elitist, i.e., unilateral use of power, is itself *inconsistent* with the attention of the later- stage action-logics towards collaboration and mutuality. The later action-logics, being collaborative and responsive, are the very opposite of elitist and hierarchical. Complicating matters, however, is that all people experience what Piaget also called attention to among children, named 'decalage,' i.e., shorter or longer periods of regression. This phenomenon is receiving more attention recently among adults (McCallum, 2008; Livesay, 2022). We hope our paper could be understood as a contribution to the ongoing debate by emphasizing *the practice* of non-elitist power ascribed to the later stages of development.

As a final note we remind all of us that humans are fallible, and our thinking is ridden by (unconscious) cognitive biases. A key idea in our paper is that this is perhaps most particularly so when we extract ourselves from relationships with others and eschew the *social* aspects of learning. We are after all one of the more social species on Earth. We might say then that the proof of the pudding resides in *how* we do our work, and or react to challenges that destabilize our sense of mutuality. Thus, feedback becomes critically important, both giving and receiving, within social groupings, per the norms of collaborative and responsive practices. Our work is toward collective transformation. The practices we outline are therefore aiming to be the very opposite of elitist and hierarchical while acknowledging that it is a journey of learning with others by doing.

Leadership scholar William Torbert (2004) puts the insights of decades of adult development theory succinctly by explaining that our capacity to integrate what we hold in awareness at any given time—about 'me,' 'you,' 'it/external world'—equals our stage of development or 'action logic.' As the term action logic suggests, the constructive outcome of adult development is *the reliable ability to*

*bring action and inquiry together.* The theory of adult development is therefore helpful in framing how transformations in individuals happen in such a way that social transformations can be supported for a world whose complexity is growing. This complexity, as Kegan (1988) argues, is beyond most of our capacity, which may explain the ever growing and linked eco-social crises we are collectively failing to grapple with and often sidestep. Empirical studies show strong correlations between psychological maturity of a person's action logic and their effectiveness in a chosen arena (Rooke & Torbert, 2005). The theory suggests that with growing personal maturity we become more and more able to 'walk our talk' which increases credibility and effectiveness of our engagement and helps transformations happen in a myriad of contexts.

To effectively pursue transformation, we argue that learners and educators need to develop capacity, simultaneously, to integrate awareness of themselves, others, and of the external world, and to act from this combined awareness for practical good. It is an awareness with relevance to how we might live more sustainably with all beings in the world we share. We know empirically that later stage organizational and personal transformation are linked (Rooke & Torbert, 2005); those who consciously practice with awareness-advancing self-development and a wider repertoire of collaboration also appear in global assessments to be rising, at least in the professional population who can invest in self-development (Barker-Hardman & Erfan, 2015; Torbert, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

The coLABs we describe are open to a self-selecting population of global action researching educator-change leaders. While it is not a requirement that participants are so called later stage, in practice 90% assess at such stages. Why this is so (effectively the inverse of the general professional population) lies beyond this paper. However, we might say that the kind of transformative action research supported by the AR+ Foundation, with its emphasis on stakeholder driven processes and inclusion of diverse populations, simply draws and then conditions practitioners in ever greater levels of complex sense-making and perspective giving. There is explicit emphasis on practicing with moving from power-over to power-with (Follett, 1924) within the community. In this action researching participants necessarily combine multiple, often paradoxical, roles—say facilitator and protagonist; analyst and collaborative planner; logician and peace maker; speaker and writer, feedback giver and feedback recipient, etc. In the coLAB context we describe there is therefore much attention on the use of

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<sup>2</sup> Barker-Hartman and Erfan 2015 note that a large portion (around 30%) of senior leaders, high potential candidates and organizational consultant/action researchers profile at the redefining action-logic. This is comparable *with the first step* between Robert Kegan's stages of self-authoring and self-transforming mind. Although still a type of dependent mindset, this action logic exhibits much more questioning on its way to transformative mindset. Perhaps also interesting to note is that those measuring at redefining also report the most dislike of stage theory, with many dismissing it as elitist.

power, feedback, and collaboration, oriented with a ‘both and’ rather than either/or orientation.

The following table highlights three issues considered central to action researchers’ capacity for co-creation namely 1) the practice of receiving (critical) feedback, 2) drawing on different types of power and 3) creating experiments with collaborative action, from minimally required cooperation to co-creativity, with one another. The three stages of increasing maturity, moving from being dependent to independent and interdependent, are illustrated. Our proposition is that the practice of interdependence that characterizes later stage learners requires, or at least is facilitated by, subtractive awareness. This is not to say that subtractive awareness is only of relevance to later stage learners; all development involves letting go of the stability that comes with a familiar stage, so all learners could potentially benefit from becoming more conscious of what they might need to let go of to continue their learning journey.

Note the first row, which describes early stage sensemaking—named dependent—expresses stereotypical thoughts all of us might have, especially in conditions of uncertainty or anxiety. That our response, at this particular stage may be aggressive and/or silent may be confusing as these appear so dissimilar. Yet on closer inspection both are a response to seeing the threat as *entirely external*. Little to no inquiry is available. For this reason, it’s described as a state of dependence. In this dependence, we conform to social, frequently gendered scripts that we have been taught to deal with difficult circumstances (e.g., don’t cry, be polite). Only minimal collaborative action is possible.

Row two expresses stereotypical thoughts as more capacity for tending to our inner world becomes available. Even if we might prefer a comfortable context, we can nonetheless tolerate discomfort and still learn because we can summon inner resources say of patience or optimism or simply endurance. This later stage—we call it independence—means we have *individually* developed more access to our inner world of sensemaking. We therefore have capacity for mutually helping toward a defined goal. This is the stage of stable self-authorship.

Row three actively embraces the discomforting moments *despite* anxiety. This stage combines inner and outer resources, i.e., individual self-authorship within a safe-enough shared space. At this stage co-creativity—a step into the creative unknown with its surprises—becomes possible. The coLABs we describe are aimed at encouraging extension of repertoire into Row three and inviting later stage learners from the worlds of education and politics to practice at ever higher levels of mutual empowerment. Adult developmental theory was very present in the coLAB process because all participants completed an online developmental self-assessment early in the coLAB that offered suggestions on developmental practices to experiment with as the coLAB proceeded.

Next, we offer some real-life vignettes of subtractive awareness to illustrate how this is enacted in transformations among educator change leaders and how this relates to developmental work. The vignettes are followed by a discussion of conditions that support subtractive awareness.

	FEEDBACK	POWER	COLLABOR-ACT
<b>Conforming (Fear)</b>			
Requires a comfortable context, otherwise anxiety provokes (quiet) protest.	<i>I don't want to be embarrassed by you. I don't want to stand out. I don't want to care about anyone's feedback (even if I have to)!</i>	<i>My way or the highway! Leave me out of this. I do not want to get involved.</i>	<i>I have to protect myself. I demand your loyalty. I want to follow the leader. My collaboration is minimal, accords with conforming to external expectations.</i>
<b>Independent/Autonomous (Neutral/Neutered)</b>			
Would prefer a comfortable context but can bring sit with discomfort and still learn.	<i>Is this feedback valid? What are your credentials? How is this going to help me achieve my goals?</i>	<i>There is a right answer. Let's accomplish more!</i>	<i>I follow the data; facts tell us the right solution. I measure my value as a function of what goals I attain. Cooperation is possible if I see the value of others input.</i>
<b>Interdependent/Relational Warmth (Love?)</b>			
The unfamiliar discomfort is sometimes more interesting than the familiar comforts.	<i>Thank you for your feedback! All voices need to be heard. Now, how do we work together on this so all beings may thrive?</i>	<i>You lead. I want to share power. I want us to alternate different types of power: power over, power from within, power together. Let's choicefully lead, and follow, one another's genius.</i>	<i>Co creativity is possible. Can we imagine how to redesign the system together to include all voices (also those not here)? Let's learn in doing this together.</i>

Table 1. Developmental Stages of Feedback, Power and Collaborative Action, originally elaborated in Bradbury 2022.

## Vignettes of Subtractive Awareness

The following vignettes are from the final 'reflection and celebration' session of the coLAB. Those who attended were recorded speaking about their experience of the arc of their learning journey into and through the work together. Each received a copy of their recording. Some of the original participants were absent due to struggles with Covid and/or time zone issues over what was a Holiday period. We did not include written reflections from the latter group.

The following reports were specifically prompted using sentence stems:

1. Because of my journey through this coLAB, I...e.g. encountered, learned...
2. During my journey through this coLAB, I let go of...
3. The gift I am carrying into my practice is...

**Chris**, a university professor who turned 50 during the coLAB, reported letting go of his previously tight grip on facilitation (something relevant to all his work with clients and students): “As one of the coLAB facilitators, I entered with a strong commitment to developing a ‘bullet proof’ session structure with detailed run sheets and abundant scaffolding. My developmental assessment encouraged me to embrace emergence and uncertainty, which prompted me to let go of my previous need for detailed facilitation structures and adopt a more open and responsive facilitation approach—not only during the coLAB but in other facilitation jobs.”

**Bem**, a university professor, program designer and published novelist in her 50’s reported that stepping to her developmental edge meant: “Stepping out of the sage on the stage persona”—the educator who has to be an expert, or in this case, the storyteller who has to be an expert on storytelling. “Usually, I hang out with the novelists and other storytellers. They’re my tribe, but I had to let go of the story-telling tribe and join a story-action tribe in this coLAB. In this community, I had to let go of controlling the narrative and understand how others in the action research community—not the storytelling community—used narrative. And that went well beyond simply the telling of a tale. In doing so, I learned about other uses of narrative and decentered narratives (mid-way through the coLAB participants stepped into more of a design role and thereafter everything we created together was emergent and collective.) Creating together meant feeling the ‘unity’ in community. In narrative terms, Joseph Campbell might have called it the stage of ‘atonement’ in the hero’s journey. I call it ‘at-one-ment.’ That feeling that all our stories have some sort of connective tissue—a greater unity. It was wonderful experimenting with this insight. So, the gift I take... well it’s a gift that keeps on giving!”

**Meghna**, a scholar practitioner and principal at a successful South Asian action research NGO in her 50’s, reported “encounter with my past in a new way and with it reflection on deep creativity with kindred souls with whom I did not expect connections. What it enables for me was the central notion of the self. I also let go of

leveraging human rationality and in our session on interspecies knowing I came to celebrate instinct again. My gift is to share this with my own organization and with other organizations we train. When we go beyond the projects what remains? The self. The self is sustained in everything we do."

**Susie**, a university academic in her 40's, reflects "the key thing I encountered is attentiveness to relationships and how and when they are formed. I started to see this as mycelial connective tissue becoming a mesh of roots. I let go some shame, as a facilitator, in not always arriving with evidence of my good work in the form of Miro boards etc. Instead, there was joy, serendipity and play in what was emerging."

Since the vignettes illustrate the results of subtraction, we will go deeper now into the process that supported 'stepping up' elements of the scaffolding processes.

## Moving Backstage

A coLAB is best considered a 'backstage' (Goffman, 1956), used to practice for 'front stage' action research efforts outside the coLAB. Over the seven years in which coLABs have been evolving in the AR+ Foundation, the success of a coLAB involves resolving dilemmas that most organized groups struggle with, namely that individually and together, participants of a learning group (*unconsciously*) block learning through cognitive biases that give rise to learning defenses. Action researcher Chris Argyris (1990) noted how common a problem these learning defenses are, and how they rise in tandem the more academically well trained the participants are.<sup>3</sup>

Modern psychology has distinguished a variety of common cognitive biases that defend us against learning. These are variously named as framing effect, negativity bias, self-serving bias, confirmation bias, inattentional blindness, etc. There are related common behaviors increasingly familiar in society now understood to also influence economics by showing that individuals and groups make irrational decisions.<sup>4</sup> These biases regularly produce problematic imbalances in inquiry versus advocacy, itself a product of confirmation bias meshed with cultural assumptions about who gets to speak and who listens. Seeing those blockages and subtracting them one by one can be successful with

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<sup>3</sup> In a personal communication to first author Argyris quipped that they're highest of all among groups of university professors(!).

<sup>4</sup> Kahneman and Tversky published a series of seminal articles on judgment and decision-making in 1974 based on prospect theory that explained how we avoid risk when making decisions that offer a potential gain, and take risks when making decisions that could lead to a certain loss. Kahneman's 2011 book popularizes these notions as fast vs. slow thinking.

the imposition of new rules, such as, when brainstorming everyone is welcome and no one can be critiqued. And indeed, such rules are helpful. Still the actual practice of scaffolding a group toward maturity, namely, to see and step beyond its biases, remains rare. The emancipatory action research tradition explains that we are limited because we've been shaped by an educational system that has (over) emphasized conceptualization and analysis with too little emphasis on converging toward experimentations. So while, for example, we may know we must take action, on we talk anyway; while we know we must 'listen' (and may even congratulate ourselves for being excellent listeners), little is accomplished beyond our excellent listening. The coLAB is therefore designed to relentlessly (if gently) scaffold development through inviting participative processes to encourage each participant with their own developmental work taken into experiments.

## Starting with Experience

The constructivist learning approach is action oriented and is sometimes simply called action or adult learning (Kolb, 1976). It orients from the revolutionary importance of learning from our own experience (versus looking to external authorities for external facts and figures). This was first articulated by William James to become the center of what today we call a pragmatist or consequentialist philosophy, since clarified by Kolb (1976) as a learning cycle. Experience lies also at the heart of the appeal of Freire's (1970) liberationist education which denounces a still pervasive banking model of pedagogy in which experts dole out their knowledge to eager recipients.

In action learning we are transforming experience through conceptualization *and* experimentation, thinking and doing in ways meaningful to those involved. In the reflection component, subtractive awareness becomes possible as participants see the opportunity to let go of commitments that have calcified for them or set them on unproductive routes. This reflection is quite personal and creates space for the new. Learning to choicefully let go of what had previously seemed a necessary practice is guided by listening more carefully to the authority of inner experience, supported through engagement/experimenting with collaborators. Thus, subtraction may be considered a form of seeking wholeness, of doing more with less. Per Table 1, leaving space for more feedback allows unexpected co-creativity. This is as much a relational as individual emergence, occurring as it does in the space among individuals within a larger, energetic sense of support. The relational space itself emerges through a realization that exchange (of support, ideas etc.) enables ever more creative exchange. Foregrounding the space in which a group works is a localized adaptation of Lewin's (1946) "social field" which Scharmer and Kaufer (2015) define as "the structure of relationships among individuals, groups, organizations and systems that gives rise to collective behaviors and outcomes." Thus, the quality of the relational space deserves attention.



## Relational Space with a Supportive "Protainer"

In entering into a coLAB, participants are greeted by an explicit invitation to “work at the developmental edge.” Participants are further invited to take a baseline developmental assessment so that they can name that edge for themselves. Participants do not expect to be ‘teaching’ one another, except according to Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of sharing a zone of ‘proximal development,’ in which each person has the opportunity to emerge as educator around a given issue. The space is therefore fluid, participatory. The facilitators take as a primary role to convene (therefore to clarify logistics of when, where, etc.) and to be role models for how to enact a brave space. As the facilitator role rotates, they too are themselves participants.

At the start of each session participants meet guidelines referred to as ‘protainer’ enablers. ‘Pro’ suggests we do the work for our stakeholders outside of the container also. The term is informed by the psychoanalytic tradition in group relations with its understanding that people must manage anxiety. Unlike the Tavistock/T-Group tradition<sup>5</sup> there is no attempt to create anxiety, but rather an emphasis on working with what is present, which may include anxiety. The enablers are therefore a set of guidelines that call one another to support a brave space of learning. The guidelines are not novel and include, inter alia, an invitation to generative pauses, to balance advocacy with inquiry, and to share feedback. Yet over the first years of the Foundation’s coLABs these simple guidelines have developed into a key ritual to remind people to drop, as much as possible, the cognitive biases that inhibit learning together. The protainer guidelines are usually introduced with a few minutes for silent settling.

Per the terms of Table 1, the guidelines invite participants to step as much as possible toward interdependence with those present. This is subtly different from, though certainly related to, the individualistic notion of ‘psychological safety.’ The brave space of a protainer aims to coproduce *mutually transforming power* through initial simple —yet profound—agreements for *the sake of what we might accomplish together*. In this way developmental reflexivity among all is invited (in Freire’s term, conscientization, i.e., consciousness raising). With this protainer operating as the backdrop relational space, different preferences for conceptualization and experimentation come into being, in what we therefore manage as a polarity of conceptual and experimental spaces.

- **Conceptual space** emphasizes coming to reframe important cognitions which may mean realizing and choicefully omitting facets of identity that no longer serve in a particular context.
- **Experimental space:** The learning space is intended to serve life outside the coLAB, but using the coLAB as a laboratory. Facilitators therefore encourage all participants to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tavainstitute.org/>

perform/enact/prototype/try-on/embody new ideas, and to create the path by walking out of the coLAB and into one's 'real life.'

Participants report (note Meghna's words above) that *uncovering creativity means re-finding* what has been hidden by too much rationality. We see this also in Bem's return to her love of story by subtracting her control of the narrative. Importantly, and also evident in all vignettes, participants speak of the impact with stakeholders outside the coLABs. For Bem this is with her students and in invited speeches she delivers; for Meghna it is with colleagues in her think tank and the numerous other think tanks and multiple action researching projects in SE Asia. Chris further reflected on his experience in the coLAB as a rediscovery of practicing with the concept of polarities: "I moved from having a purely theoretical appreciation for the concept to working with polarities in practice with others. Subtractive awareness manifested in having become a bit stuck on the idea I heard myself share about transforming problematic grand narratives, such as neoliberal capitalism. I had focused on developing a replacement grand narrative that could gather equivalent power. In the coLAB I started to let go of this idea and embrace the notion that diverse alternative narratives might guide transformation without cohering into the same kind of narrative as neoliberal capitalism."

The experience of subtractive awareness can feel liberating, a practice of creating space that wasn't there before. In one coLAB session, Chris described the feeling that he was "carrying these heavy rocks that stopped him from climbing, and it was a great relief to realize that I could simply set them down and carry on." More practically, he reflected that letting go of "bullet proof run sheets" in his facilitation practice had freed him from the feeling that he had to "get things back on track," allowing him to respond to the present needs of the group more creatively. Ultimately, he reflects, "I had to let go of my fear that not following a run sheet would lead to disaster. The coLAB provided a safe space to experiment with new practices before taking them out into the world."

Generally, we may say that participants learn if they experience themselves moving toward emancipation, feeling liberated to be more themselves. Thus, the value of the coLABs is a combination of feeling revitalized, reawakening to one's own earlier intuitions or deeper values and 'paying it forward' in work with stakeholder clients or students. The impact or value is shown ('proofed' in Pragmatist terms) by actions taken outside the space with stakeholders for the common good (Bradbury-Huang et al., 2010).

## Practicing Subtractive Awareness

We turn now to a handful of actionable elements of this subtractive approach that appear to support the specifically developmental nature of the work:

### 1. *Developmental Edge Assessment*

In terms of subtractive awareness, knowing what developmental stage you tend to operate from and where you could potentially be headed can give a powerful sense of what to let go of and what to embrace. For example, for Chris, the wording of the developmental assessment helped in recognizing a rigidity in his facilitation approach—letting this go was frightening but liberating.

Participants in coLABs are offered a specially designed online assessment keyed to Loevinger's work (*Shifting Horizons*, 2022).<sup>6</sup> It's specifically intended to support participants in gaining clarity about their own developmental edge with regards to power, feedback, and collaboration. The self-assessment uses mostly images so that people's selections, as suggested by the projective hypothesis,<sup>7</sup> and the gathered responses, then help the participants become more aware of their thinking and behaviors. In voluntary sharing of results of the assessment, participants have insights into experiments they might make (e.g., experiment with abandoning a facilitator flow sheet; decentering oneself as the expert in the room) with a reminder that each action-logic unlocks more choice and wider perspectives (one can also choose not to abandon previous habits).<sup>8</sup>

### 2. *Facilitator-Participants*

Noted above, facilitators see themselves also as participants. Thus, when facilitating they do so consciously at their developmental edge. Yet there is a right balance. Facilitators also serve participants-stakeholders who arrive to a coLAB for their own purposes. Thus, attention follows intent. Tensions can be transformed—cognitively—from something to avoid, into rich opportunities to grow and discover when the lens is swiveling between self and context. Susanna illustrates how she combines the dual roles:

It was 10 minutes before the workshop start time and I'm feeling really contracted. I asked my co-facilitator 'what about you?' In fact, I felt concerned that unresolved tension between us might occlude our ability to act and facilitate

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<sup>6</sup> <https://shiftinghorizons.io/>

<sup>7</sup> The empirically grounded assumption that ambiguous stimuli of images used in the assessment bypass both conscious suppression and unconscious defenses that might otherwise result in faked, distorted, or falsified responses.

<sup>8</sup> For those who seek other ways to engage in personal developmental work, freely available 'self quizzes' that exist on the internet might be repurposed for developmental praxis.

our explicit shared intention, which was to facilitate a safe, open and honest learning space for others. By shining the light on ourselves, through candid and brave discussion, we were able to make visible the archetypal poles we were unconsciously preferencing. We agreed to stay present and curious about our dynamic throughout the coLAB to see what learnings might arise, particularly since our main visceral activity was all about embodying-to-make-visible polarizing tensions in a change process. (Susanna, CoLab participant)

As a result of this practice with peers, and beyond the coLAB itself, Susanna has become more reliably a “conscious initiator of collective self-reflexivity with all the teams she works with when delivering design, leader development, or change services. Although uncomfortable, and risking being perceived as difficult or too process oriented, she “takes a stand for transformational inquiry when tension arises in the moment.”

### 3. Feel Bothered

Stepping to one’s own developmental edge is an invitation then to allow oneself to notice something that is ‘pulling at our sleeve,’ something that bothers us, in that it holds us back, perhaps related to our anxiety. And while self-insight may catalyze development, such awareness is sterile until embodied. Focus is thus potentially transformative yet can be wasted in self-critical rumination. Thus, again an opportunity to share with peers helps fruition of insight in experiment and/or experiments becoming crystallized as insight. In popular psychology, power of awareness has come to mean focus on the positive. However, for later stages of development, the very thing that bothers us can be offered *judicious* attention when trusting the company of peers (‘developmental friends’),<sup>9</sup> to yield a new stage of development. We might say simply that information in our heads seeks naturally to move through the feeling body (heart) so as to be expressed/liberated in embodiment, i.e., as movement, or hands taking action. The participant’s consciousness best allows this internal momentum by not impeding it. When we become aware of something in the body, we have the power to change it. Therefore, clarifying the intention to expand ourselves and our

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<sup>9</sup> The roots of the practice of developmental friendship appeared in Bradbury and Torbert, (2016), a book that described a relational action inquiry into the dynamics of power and love. Now developed as central to Action Research for Transformations, this type of inquiry transforms through life as it transforms how we live our life. The six elements comprise: 1) engaging in some kind of shared work; 2) feeling high relational regard toward one another; 3) wishing to become more known to one another; 4) making a commitment to self-development through reflexivity; 5) experiencing a quest that increases—and requires—mutuality on the way to a more sustainable world; 6) recognizing the significant role of a “third” presence—namely a mutual friend and/or community of co-practitioners. See also <https://actionresearchplus.com/pausing-in-developmental-friendship-enjoy-the-practice/>

transformational capacity is a necessary precursor to being part of helping transformations happen.

#### ***4. Narrate the Absence as Change***

Narrative theorists point out that stories tend to be about change. As each participant in a coLAB changes, they are acting out a new story. In perhaps the most well-known narrative structure, the hero's journey, the protagonist sets out by letting go of their comfortable existence in the 'ordinary world' and crossing the threshold into adventure. As they return from their adventure, changed, they typically come with a gift that replaces that which they left behind. In this sense, subtraction is rarely just subtraction—it is clearing space for the new to emerge and take root in the self. Storytelling is thus a powerful practice for reflectively narrating the changes experienced in a coLAB: What has been left behind? What has been gained? What has changed?

In addition to the hero's journey, our coLAB worked with Marshall Ganz's (2011) public narrative framework, which encourages communicators to tell a story that starts with 'I.' The idea is that the story of self establishes credibility. This is followed by 'a story of now' that contains a call to action (e.g., the IPCC has told us we are the generation that decides how climate change progresses, now what?). And a 'story of us' that articulates how we are together able to respond to that call for action (Ganz, 2011). With our commitment to mutual learning and relationality, we worked with this framework quite differently. The coLAB experience can be narrated as a series of attempts to bring forth a story of us by sharing our stories of self. In the terms of the three spaces (i.e., relational space, conceptual space, and experimental space) explained above, through which participants scaffold themselves, i.e., through relational, conceptual and experimental spaces, our personal stories can also be told as ones that bridge our own emancipatory 'relational' space with its spaciousness, with conceptual space's shifts in self-identity into experimental space with its reach toward co-creativity.

At the start of co-designing the coLAB, colleagues came with the intention of exploring how narrative informs action research for transformations. In retrospect the bothersome nature of this combination of narrative and action research became the very issue that was subtracted for her. She explains:

“Just to get started I had to grapple with an internal struggle. I respected these these co-facilitators but their emphasis on narrative bothered me. I explained that I saw narrative as somewhat 'airy and unpragmatic.' Worse, I explained I feared we'd waste time in pleasant storytelling about transformation yet experience nothing transforming with our stakeholders within the various spheres of influence outside the coLAB we each led. However, at my developmental edge I saw a need to move in a way that works for all of us. So it followed that I needed to release/give

up my concern and engage in a way that was fully supportive. I committed to the collaboration by saying: ‘I trust and support your emphasis on narrative. I will keep my focus on scaffolding the group in taking developmental steps. “Over the months, I saw my colleagues shaping and allowing others shape the coLAB in ways no one originally imagined. I saw individual agency becoming co-agency. Narratives came to be reframed. It was no longer the airy vocabulary I feared, but compelling storytelling linked to creative actions taking place outside the coLAB. I experimented with embracing the Ganz narrative framework my colleagues loved so much. I used it in leadership development work with politicians. Bem summarized this move from self to others saying, ‘haven’t we always been seeking the story of us.”’

### Subtractive Awareness Births New Narrative

The following are steps in facilitating subtractive awareness.<sup>10</sup> They presume starting knowledge of one’s own developmental stage and a reasonable level of brave space protainer with developmental peers. They may be helpful for others.

- What is your developmental edge?
- What is one developmental step you can take in being brave with others?
- What might you need to let go of to take this developmental step?
- What do you expect might change among your stakeholders as a consequence?
- [later] What has actually changed/is changing?
- What’s the new story of you/your stakeholders that you’d like to share?
- What gift are you now carrying into your practice?

## Limitations and Parameters

The practice of subtractive awareness serves best those who self-select out of a desire to learn to meet the complexity of their stakeholders and environment. Importantly, our understanding of subtractive awareness emerged with learners already well anchored in their inner authority, i.e., capable of self-authoring. In developmental terms they are at least capable of redefining their own worlds and

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<sup>10</sup> With thanks also to Dr. Miren Larrea of Orkestra Institute at Deusto University whose related work in the Basque Country first articulated these questions.

work informed but not dominated by external standards. These are learners who, additionally, are willing to risk ego destabilization in the companionship of others to liberate more of their own capacity and its multiplier effect. These are the educator change leaders with capacity to ‘pay it forward.’ Paradoxically they are becoming more themselves. Thus, they can invite more of their students and clients (and people at later stages *always* have students or clients, they are not individual producers [Jaques, 1998]) toward the difficult work of living well within our complex and transformative times of eco-social crisis without being paralyzed—or sleepwalking—with anxiety.

As noted earlier, all development involves some letting go, so there are ways in which all learners can engage with subtractive awareness through critical reflection. But the full practice described here is perhaps not for the majority i.e., people whose ‘emancipation’—developmentally speaking—requires further addition of internal authority. Put simply, if participants don’t have a well-advanced independent stage of development, they can’t as easily engage successfully in the ego destabilization required of interdependence. Invitation to subtraction is likely to be either ignored/dismissed or possibly criticized as confusing or simply a waste of time.

Further, subtraction may be offered but *never* exercised on others. Key, therefore, is that scaffolding efforts are foremost role modeled with authenticity by the facilitators. The following participant’s self-report is from a coLAB led by Susanna with a different set of professionals. We see in it a contrast. The coLAB participant is younger, early 30s, and recently progressing career wise. They describe a developmental edge of ‘letting go of pleasing others’ (which might be read, developmentally, as consolidating more in self authorship after years of self-conforming). The participant explains: “I’ve worked hard to get to this point in my career, I need to give living from my own inner voice a chance. I can’t stifle it anymore. I feel an urgency that my intention for my life needs to be lived. I think it will make the difference in the long run.” We see this ‘letting go,’ however, less as a subtraction and instead as a deepening of ‘internal authority.’ By way of contrast we might name it ‘additive’ which precedes ‘subtractive’ awareness.

Linking to the theme of narrative, we might write that being an interdependent author—a teller of co-creative stories with others—requires that author to have a sense of their own ‘authority.’ Such authorial voice may be hard won, especially for populations that have been historically marginalized (the very population that action researchers often work with). For example, the participant quoted above goes on to note an obstacle attributed to their cultural background, explaining: “It’s foreign and unknown in the culture I come from where communal environments regulate each other. The practices I and we learned to invite self-regulation are opening my awareness of a new possibility of what the future holds, and how to bring my full self forward.” One of the conundrums of later stage scaffolding is the hold of the polarity of self-importance (with its destructive edge of narcissism) with that of group presence (with its descriptive

edge of group mind). Cultural habits are not caught up with this later stage of relational growth, thus coLABs and similar initiatives are experimenting with new ways of being, relationally.

We end with a note on the necessary ethical orientation of this work and a reminder of its purpose. Scaffolding efforts with subtractive awareness serve a sustainability outcome in that they can multiply adult development and stakeholder experimentation in the service of sustainable living. Therefore, the work we describe grants dignity, or paradoxical *autonomous regard*, to use the vocabulary of Indigenous scholar Mary Graham. That helps ensure individuals may rise toward unconstrained interdependence, a key to the Great Turning toward a life enhancing society.

The proliferating promise of coLABoratorship, namely the combination of leadership and collaboration within a social laboratory of action, is that creative solutions at the local level can become globally conjoined. We aspire to a more beautiful world for all beings.

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Peer Review Article

# Conscious Systemic Leadership:

## A Theoretical Construct Drawing from the Philosophy of *Shiva*

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### Abstract

Conscious systemic leadership (CSL) is a theoretical construct that draws from Shiva consciousness. Through major parts of history, theories and narratives have taken an individualistic approach to leadership focusing on the person as a leader. However, systemic leadership (SL) is an emergent phenomenon that draws on synergies and concerted efforts of several people and institutions operating across several places and levels to create a more purposeful and meaningful existence for us. If SL is about shifting the focus from the self to the wider scheme of existence, a consciousness-based approach is necessary. A consciousness-based approach enables us to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation. The philosophy of Shiva is drawn on to understand that consciousness is the substratum of reality, an insight used to build the theoretical construct of CSL. In Shiva consciousness, reality is embodied in our experience of the world through a transcendental and eternal process of fusion and dance of energies between the opposing archetypes of the purusha and prakriti; pure consciousness and the creative force, respectively. Everywhere, in each minute attribute of

reality, a “self” is present, which is the universal consciousness of Shiva. CSL demands a set of new thinking and practices to bring this concept to life. With the integration of consciousness, CSL makes a new addition to the field of SL as the first attempt in the literature to draw on perspectives from Hindu philosophy, more specifically the Shiva philosophy.

## Keywords

systemic leadership; Shiva; consciousness; Hindu philosophy

## Introduction

In this paper, I will make an experimental attempt to connect an understanding of consciousness, drawn from the philosophy of the Hindu god, *Shiva*, to systemic leadership (SL) to present a new theoretical construct of, what I call, conscious systemic leadership (CSL). I call this attempt “experimentative” because I am trying to bring together two very different disciplines in a way that has not been done before. This attempt also serves to address the call from Ivanov (2011) that systems practice needs to be developed at the interface of formal science, political ethics, analytical psychology, and religious thought.

I will begin by talking about my motivation behind this research. Next, I will introduce SL and build an argument for the importance of integrating it with insights from consciousness. This will be followed by an introduction of *Shiva* that will cover who/what *Shiva* is, the main representations of *Shiva*, and the philosophy of *Shiva*. I will, then, articulate the ontology and epistemology of CSL based on the understanding of *Shiva* consciousness. The theoretical construct of CSL will be presented, next. Finally, I will highlight the contribution of this research and share my thoughts on the potential future inquiry into this topic.

All Sanskrit words are italicized.

## My Motivation Behind This Research

In 2018, I had the opportunity to attend a talk by Fritjof Capra, celebrated author of the *Tao of Physics*, in the UK and chatted with him over dinner. I was fascinated by how he drew inspiration from the ancient philosophy of *Shiva* to understand complex occurrences in nature and connected this understanding to quantum physics and social reality. In 2020, I met Capra again in Berkeley, US, for coffee and we talked more. His narratives gripped me and I started digging deeper into the symbolisms and philosophy of *Shiva*. I started reading interpretations of *Shiva* mythology and philosophy in the works of Alan Daniélou, Alan Watts, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Fritjof Capra, Raja Choudhury, and Stella Kramrisch, among many others. This led me to connect the profound *Shiva* philosophy to systems thinking in my first research paper (Chowdhury, 2022a) on this topic. The COVID-19 lockdown and the perils associated with it, also, led me to explore and practice certain *mantras* associated with *Shiva* that

offered me a platform for deeper introspection of my own place in the wider scheme of existence.

As I began to dig deeper into the subject, I was mesmerized by how consciousness can be understood in a different light through the lens of the *Shiva* philosophy. With my training and practitioner experience in systems thinking, I found myself motivated to draw from this understanding and craft a theoretical construct of CSL that, I believe, will benefit the discipline of systems thinking. In this paper, I will identify two key pillars for this inquiry: the ontology and epistemology of this research. The ontology will be based on the understanding that consciousness is fundamental to our existence. Insights from *Shiva* consciousness point towards the understanding that reality is embodied and it arises due to the pulsating dance between opposing energies. This will form my basis to arrive at the epistemology that life is an embodied experience of this pulsating dance of opposing energies manifested in the expansive states of existence in which we find ourselves.

## Systemic Leadership (SL)

Through major parts of history, theories and narratives by various scholars (Bass, 1985; Carlyle, 1840; Gill, 2011; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; House, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Maxwell, 1993; Nicholas & Cottrell, 2014; Stogdill, 1950;) have taken an individualistic approach to leadership. Marking a stark departure from the individual-oriented approach, critical leadership studies focus on power relations and identity constructions that are inherent in social systems which play a direct role in legitimizing and reproducing divisive and exclusive societal roles (Banks, 2008; Collinson, 2011; Fairhurst, 2007; Gabriel, 1997; Kellerman, 2016; Lipmen-Blumen, 2005; Nye, 2008). Critical theory eschews orthodox designations of leader and follower as the starting point of its inquiry and focuses on leadership as an emergent phenomenon of groups (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018). Leadership is considered a social process occurring among all members in a social setting regardless of what position they hold. Formal and informal interactions, seen and unseen alliances, and differences and convergences align and mobilize the members in the social context towards a shared vision, making leadership an emergent phenomenon (Curral et al., 2016; Fransen et al., 2015; Ritchie et al., 2006; Spillane, 2006). The grand challenges facing our world—climate change, data colonization, threat of nuclear war, poverty, migration, hunger, and species extinction, among many others—are impossible to pin down if approached in isolation. To navigate such realities, what is needed is a new form of collective leadership capacity that is more conscious (Scharmer, 2019). Scharmer calls for a collective connection to the highest future possibilities and bringing it to the “now” through his theory of presencing. Presencing happens when our perception begins to occur from the source of our emerging future. Such a vision needs a different form of leadership from the traditional approaches, where the focus shifts from the individual to the collective and takes shape in the form of SL. For such a transformation,

practitioners need to go through a shift in their own position and boldly embrace viewpoints from other stakeholders, who may have contrarian perspectives, in a process where they may often have to de-center themselves in the path towards creating a shared future (Senge et al., 2015). To achieve such a future state, a consciousness-based approach is necessary.

## Consciousness-Based Approach to SL

A consciousness-based approach to SL can enable the understanding that each one of us is part of the wider scheme of existence. This understanding can help us to de-center ourselves from the singular self to the collective self and create the necessary conditions for the realization of SL. Daniélou (2006, p. 97) notes:

An element of consciousness acts as a kind of inactive witness in every atom or conglomerate of atoms, in every cell, as well as at the center of the 'inner organ', the principal engine of every living being... However, this consciousness does not really 'belong' to the inner organ, since it is inseparable from Universal Consciousness...

Gurdjieff touches on the interconnectedness of the universe where everything is alive and self-feeding, working towards the realization of higher levels of being (Cusack, 2011). Gurdjieff's works extend the limits of human inquiry into the domain of cosmology that, through universal laws, connects individual existence to the context of cosmic existence. Gurdjieff advocates that the purpose of life must be a development of the soul, rescuing it from the fragmented interests dominated by trivial likes and dislikes. Through his laws, Gurdjieff developed a body of emanative cosmology that covers the different manifestations and concentrations of energy that flow from the absolute.

A consciousness-based approach allows us to appreciate social purpose, personal commitment, and meaningful entrepreneurial creativity. Taking a conscious approach is one of the most authentic skills needed for accountable and responsible leadership (Hayden, 2017; Jonesa & Brazdaub, 2015; Laszlo, 2020; Marinčič & Marič, 2018;). Conscious leadership is:

“a theory grounded in the sociocultural knowledge of reciprocity, which allows leaders to perceive patterns in the environment, see the interconnectivity of multiple problems, and subscribe to a participatory leadership style, which incorporates the idea of shared responsibility and problem solving” (Jones, 2012, p. 41).

A consciousness-based approach to SL can lead to the realization of the importance of self-awareness, humility, and mindfulness (Cooper & Croswell, 2011). Conscious leadership is about being truly responsible for one's actions and communication (Klopčič, 2009; Ward & Haase, 2016). Several other works talk about the relevance of consciousness and spiritual traditions in systemic management and meaningful leadership (Coll, 2021; Gu & Zhu, 2000; Maheshwari, 2021; Rajagopalan, 2020; Sharma, 2014; Shen & Midgley, 2007 a, b, c, 2015; Zhu, 2000). A wide range of research has shown that a consciousness-

based discourse can lead to leadership behaviors that are more compassionate and rewarding, and practices that are more responsible and sustainable (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2012; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010; Khalsa, 2010; Nandram & Borden, 2010; Sheep, 2006; Tackney et al., 2017; Tzouramani & Karakas, 2016). A consciousness-based approach to leadership needs to be considered as a “holistic spiritual approach” (Nandram, 2016, p. 65) that requires an ability to connect the awareness of the individual existence to the wider cosmic existence. However, extending the importance of understanding consciousness to develop a new understanding of SL is currently a gap in existing literature.

A consciousness-based approach has the potential to enable practitioners to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation. It can help in striking a balance between the pursuits of actions and an evocation of humility and release of the ego. In light of the polycrises gripping the world, and in the context of the arguments that I have presented above, there is a need to link SL with consciousness.

The following discussion will attempt to understand the *Shiva* philosophy and an exploration will be made to draw from this understanding to develop a theoretical construct for CSL.

## Understanding *Shiva*

### Who or What is *Shiva*?

*Shiva* is one of the most important gods in Hindu mythology along with *Brahma* and *Vishnu*, who together form the holy trinity in Hindu philosophy. Based on extensive religious and historical research, Kramrisch (1981) discusses *Shiva* as the primordial energy of the universe, before which he was the seed of uncreation, holding the total potentiality of existence beyond existence and any transcendence. Reference to *Shiva* goes back to the Vedic literature from the mid-first millennium BCE (Flood, 2005). However, references to the origin of *Shiva* date back to much earlier in time with historical evidence of the presence of what many believe to be a proto-*Shiva* (Kramrisch, 1981; Pullanoor, 2019). Ancient scriptures of *Shiva* present extensive myths and allegories that attempt to convey highly sophisticated philosophical and psychological concepts and meanings.

### Representations of *Shiva*

There are four most prominent representations of *Shiva*: the *linga*, the dancing *Shiva*, the *Yogi*, and the family man.

## The Linga

*Linga* means phallus carrying the inherent symbolism of the cosmic union of opposing forces and an unmanifest reality. The *linga* is commonly seen placed on top of the *yonis* (vagina). As Rao (1914) explains, the union of the masculine and feminine is the most important generative principle and this iconography has attracted adoration and adulation from generations of people across many religions over millennia. I would like to note that the masculine and feminine are not meant to be interpreted as sexes per se, but these are archetypes representing the two fundamental opposing cosmic forces. They are also called *purusha* (masculine principle as pure consciousness) and *prakriti* (feminine principle as creative power), respectively. Drawing from *Samkhya*, the oldest school of Hindu philosophy, and Kashmir Shaivism, *prakriti* has three *gunas* (universal attributes) that are in a state of dormant equilibrium: *tamas* (darkness and chaos), *rajas* (activity and passion), and *sattva* (beingness and harmony). On one hand, *Prakriti* must come in union with *purusha* and this union is responsible for the manifestation of the universe. On the other hand, *Purusha* is meaningless without its self-realization through the manifestation process. *Purusha* and *prakriti*, therefore, are non-dual as they cannot be separated. *Shiva* can only be perceived through his creation. See figure 1 for a depiction of the *linga*.



Figure 1. Linga ruins from the Markanda temple (8<sup>th</sup> century CE) in Maharashtra (India); (Source: Wiki Media Commons).



## The Dancing Shiva

Innumerable accounts (Choudhury, 2016; Coomaraswamy, 1918; Danielou, 2006; Jansen, 1993; Kramrisch, 1981; Nanda & Michell, 2004; Pullanoor, 2019; Sharada, 2004; Sivaramamurti, 1974; Smith, 2003) serve to understand *Shiva* to be in a state of constant trance. Various forms of *Shiva*'s dance exist, all of which can be interpreted to convey the central message of the manifestation of the primal rhythmic energy.

Out of all dance forms of *Shiva*, the *Nataraja* is perhaps the most well-recognized. The *Nataraja* transcends the gender divide and portrays *Shiva* as the *Ardhanarishvara* (hermaphrodite). *Shiva* wears a male earring on the right ear and a female earring on the left ear representing masculinity and femininity respectively. *Shiva* is depicted as having four arms and engaged in a blissful dance with his locks of hair whirling towards the eternal cosmic circle. In the first right arm, *Shiva* holds the *damru*, a form of hand-held mini drum, in its beating mode, its vibration representing *srishti* or the creation of the universe and time. The first left arm is raised holding a flame of fire that atrophies matter to a formless state (Pullanoor, 2019). The fire represents *samhara* or transformation. *Srishti* and *samhara* represent the constant cycle of creation and transformation that defines the cosmic cycle. The second right arm with an open palm offers reassurance of stability and “becoming” while humanity is braced with this force of continual transformation. This is representative of *sthithi*. The second left arm with the palm pointing downwards depicts *tirobhava*, which can be interpreted to mean ignorance in which humans fall. This serves to understand concealment of knowledge and preoccupation with the creative illusion of our lived-in experience, known as *maya*. The raised left leg represents *anugraha*, or liberation, and is indicative of humankind's possibilities to attain liberation from ignorance and from being a mere witness of *maya*, caught in the intense cyclical metamorphosis of birth, life, and death. *Srishti*, *samhara*, *sthithi*, *tirobhava*, and *anugraha* are recognized as the five most important functions of the *Nataraja* and are referred to as the *panchakritya*. *Shiva*'s long locks are seen expanding into this unending cosmos in a representative union of the lord and the cosmos itself—the microcosm and the macrocosm, respectively (Chowdhury, 2022a). Capra (1975) talks about the dancing *Shiva* as a sophisticated symbol of the dance of particles and the emergence of the physical world, as studied in modern physics. See figure 2 for a depiction of the dancing *Shiva*.



Figure 2. Nataraja ruins from the Elephanta Caves (5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) in Maharashtra (India); (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

### **The Yogi**

*Shiva* is often called the supreme *yogi* (meditator) who has control over mind, body, and soul through the practice of the ultimate yoga. He is seen as the ascetic or mystic. In the words of Kramrisch (1981), “As the Lord of *Yoga* he [*Shiva*] causes the transformation of the vitally creative power into mental creativity and the interiorized objectivity of detachment that leads to release” (p. 437). As the supreme *Yogi*, *Shiva* stands still in the vertical position, which is deemed to be sacred as it symbolizes ascent towards a higher-order consciousness (Kramrisch, 1981). The yogic transcendence balances the opposing masculine and feminine energies in cosmic unity. The straight and static masculine side and the flexed and flowing feminine side assimilate in *Shiva*, the energy that is actually nothingness or complete stillness of the consciousness. See figure 3 for a depiction of *Shiva* as the *Yogi*.



Figure 3. Meditating Shiva ruins from the Elephanta Caves (5th – 6th century CE) in Maharashtra (India); (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

### The Family Man

*Shiva* is also portrayed as a family man, away from his image as an ascetic and mystic. *Shiva's* vehement meditation was interrupted by severe penance from *Parvati*, who was in love with him. The Elephanta caves, constructed about the mid-fifth to sixth centuries CE, in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra, carry elaborate carvings of *Shiva* with his wife, *Parvati* (read as equivalent to *Prakriti*) and two sons, *Kartikeya* and *Ganesha*. According to the *Skanda Purana*, the ancient scriptures dedicated to *Skanda* (another name for *Kartikeya*), dating back to the eighth century CE (Bakker, 2014; Mann, 2011), *Kartikeya* had six heads: the first five heads represent the five existential elements—earth, water, fire, air, ether—and the sixth head represents pure consciousness. *Ganesha* was the second son of *Shiva*, who was born in *Shiva's* absence. *Ganesha* was created by *Parvati* out of her own body to serve as a gatekeeper when she was taking a bath. When *Ganesha* displayed ego trying to stop his own father's entry when his mother was bathing, *Shiva* beheaded *Ganesha* without knowing that *Ganesha* was his son. Later, *Ganesha's* head was restored with the head of an elephant and since then, *Ganesha* is regarded as the god of goodwill. Family portraits of *Shiva*, often depict certain symbolisms: the powerful presence of *vasuki*, the serpent representing the preservation of secret knowledge. The locks of *Shiva's* hair can be interpreted as channeling the course of the holy Ganges as it descends from the symbolic Milky Way galaxy to the Earth. The *thrishul*, or the trident, with its three prongs represent the three worlds in Hindu mythology—*bhur* (material world), *bhuvaha* (mental world), and *svaha* (spiritual world). The bull is a symbol of *dharma* (righteousness)

reminding us of the infinite consciousness within each one of us. *Shiva's* representation as a family man is symbolic of our social existence, the reality that we, as humans, have found ourselves in. Various virtues for everyday life can be drawn from *Shiva's* representation as a family man but discussing this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper. See figure 4 for a representative portrait of *Shiva* and his family.



Figure 4. *Shiva and his family* (18<sup>th</sup> century); Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum, Mumbai; (Source: Wiki Media Commons).

Next, a discussion will be presented on how we can draw from the various myths and allegories of *Shiva* to understand consciousness.

### ***Shiva* Consciousness as the Substratum of Reality**

I will draw from the representations and allegories of *Shiva* to understand consciousness as the substratum of reality. It is important to note that stories of ancient scriptures and cultures carry their own meaning and have the potential to offer cues to address human challenges that are not restricted to time and place (Peterson, 2013). Daniélou (2006) offers commentaries to argue that that



the description of *Shiva* consciousness in Hindu philosophy is informative to our understanding of consciousness as the substratum of reality. The basis of everything that we witness as distinct, separate, or individual existences all map back to one non-distinct, non-separate, and non-individualized force. Kashmir Shaivism, attributed majorly to the works of Somananda (c. 875–925 CE), Utpaladeva (c. 925–975 C.E.), and Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025 C.E.), provides extensive commentaries on the *Shiva* philosophy as the principle of cosmic pulsation, or *spanda*, resulting in the manifestation of our worldly experience. At the very foundation is the pulsation of *prakasha*, the self-shining light of awareness, and *vimarsha*, the self-reflective power of awareness. These basic energies of pulsations are also interpreted to exist between *linga* and *yoni*, or *purusha* and *prakriti*, or *Shiva* and *Parvati/Shakti*, respectively. While *Shiva* is pure awareness, *Shakti* is the power of self-reflection that arises within us as the desire to see beneath the surface of life. The two are one.

Interestingly, scientific advancements in neuroscience and psychiatry have led to the definition of human consciousness as:

The presence of a wakeful arousal state and the awareness and motivation to respond to self and/or environmental events. In the intact brain, arousal is the overall level of responsiveness to environmental stimuli... While arousal is the global state of responsiveness, awareness is the brain's ability to perceive specific environmental stimuli in different domains, including visual, somatosensory, auditory, and interoceptive (e.g., visceral and body position). (Goldfine & Schiff, 2011, p.724)

Jeremy (2021, para. 1) notes: “Through this cosmic dance, universes are created, sustained, then dissolved back into the vast nothingness from which they arose”. The parallels between *prakasha* and *vimarsha* and arousal and awareness, respectively, seem more than a mere coincidence, and can help us to understand how consciousness can be the key to unlock awareness and awareness-based systems change.

The *Pratyabhijna* school within Kashmir Shaivism articulates that “Shiva necessarily manifests himself, and that he has no consciousness of his manifestation” (Tantray et al., 2018, p. 16). It also espouses the theory of causation called *Satkaryavada*, according to which an effect pre-exists within its cause. As a consequence of this theory, *Pratyabhijna* views the universe as the effect that pre-exists in *Shiva* himself (Berger et al., 2018). The *Spanda Karika*, one of the essential scriptures of Kashmir Shaivism, composed between the eighth and ninth century CE, attributes the origin of the cosmos to the pulsating energies between *gunas* (universal attributes) in the void between the perceiver and the perceived that give rise to the reality that we experience (Wallis, 2019). To revisit the *gunas*:

Rajas is the law of motion, velocity, and acceleration, *tamas* is the law of inertia, the guiding principle of when an object must come to rest, and *sattva* is the intelligence guiding the laws of motion and rest. Western physics does not

have an equivalent to Sattva, matter is considered inert with no intelligence of its own. Ancient Hindus attributed intelligence and consciousness to all matter since everything visible to the eye comes from the mingling of Purusha, the primordial consciousness, and Prakriti, the visible Universe. (Ayurmagaya, 2023, para. 10–14)

Similar was the view of Gurdjieff in his Three Laws according to which every phenomenon consists of three separate forces: active, passive, and reconciling or neutral. This law applies to everything in the universe (de Salzmann, 2011, p. 296). Embodied reality is the manifestation of these pulsating opposing forces.

Parrish-Sprowl et al. (2020) discuss how quantum thinking offers a similar set of assumptions that lead us to understand that everything is systemically interconnected. The mystery of the quantum world proves that even beyond the tiniest particles of matter—electrons, neutrons, and protons—and their antiparticles—antielectrons, positrons, and antiprotons, respectively—there are still smaller building blocks called quarks that are nothing but pulsating loops of energies (Carithers & Grannis, 1995). The building blocks of reality are entangled nodes of energies emerging out of “nothing”, and yet “nothing” cannot exist as empty space is itself a quantum playground. In the words of particle physicist, Jim Al-Khalili:

An average point in an empty space borrows energy from the future only to give back—a particle and an antiparticle that annihilate each other. Self-destruction back into energy. In space there is constant creation and destruction—physicists call it the quantum foam. (Reel Truth Science Documentaries, 2018, 00:00)

Parallel to this theory is the ancient *Shiva* consciousness, where reality is realized through a transcendental and eternal process of fusion and dance of energies between the archetypes of *prakasha* and *vimarsha*. Everywhere, in each minute attribute of reality, a “self” is present, which is the universal consciousness of *Shiva*. This argument resonates with Wendt (2015) and Kak (2021), who talk about consciousness as inherent to the material world and reaching all the way down to the subatomic level.

Drawing from this understanding, I have identified two key pillars—the ontology and epistemology of this research—as the scaffolds for working towards the theoretical construct of CSL.

## Ontology and Epistemology of This Research

The ontology of CSL is that consciousness is fundamental to our existence. I draw from *Shiva* consciousness to argue that reality arises due to the pulsating dance between archetypal contrarian imperatives—*prakasha* and *vimarsha*, *linga* and *yoni*, *Shiva* and *Parvati*, *Shiva* and *Shakti*, *purusha* and *prakriti*—that inform the fundamental philosophy of existence. I take “contrarian” to mean opposing and “imperative” to mean something that has a commanding importance. Hence, I use the term “contrarian imperative” to refer to selected

dichotomies, inherent in *Shiva* consciousness as the building blocks of existence. The term *Dvandva* is fundamental in Sanskrit grammar and refers to compound pairs of opposite words that bring our embodied experience to life through language and expression, thus giving a linguistic turn to this argument.

The epistemology of CSL is realized in the reality of our expansive dimensional domains. Let me explain what I mean by “dimensional domain”. SL is about appreciating our embodied nature, starting with the self, as emergent consciousness. Several other works talk about emergent reality as a hierarchical, progressive notion (Boulding, 1956; Dreier et al., 2019; Spann & Ritchie-Dunham, 2017; Stacey & Griffin, 2005). However, my notion of the dimensional domains is different: to practice SL, one must undertake the journey of transcending the self through a continual conscious engagement with the boundaries of the emergent system. Boundaries are not pre-decided, but we take an active part in deciding systemic boundaries based on our value judgments (Churchman, 1979; Midgley, 2000). Therefore, boundaries can be contracting or expanding based on our values. We draw them for the convenience of determining our intentional actions to achieve results. Dimensional domains do not indicate a hierarchy or progression. Rather, they indicate the various dimensions of our states of embodied experiences. SL is an engagement within the dimensional domains of intended boundaries within which increasing complexities emerge between the decision maker (who draws the boundaries), resources (that are required to deliver on intended actions), and responsibility (that and those affected by our actions).

See figure 5 for the ontology and epistemology of CSL.

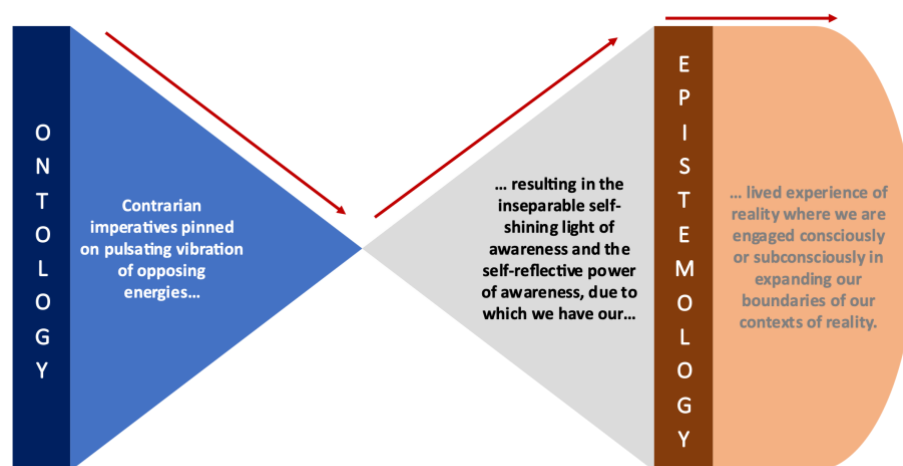


Figure 5. Ontology and epistemology of CSL.

In working towards the theoretical construct of CSL, I have considered the contrarian imperatives and dimensional domains as its two key scaffolds.

## Towards a Consciousness-Based Approach to SL

In this section, I will work towards building a theoretical construct for conscious systemic leadership (CSL). Drawing from *Shiva* consciousness, the contrarian imperatives and dimensional domains provide the scaffolding for CSL.

### Contrarian Imperatives

Three contrarian imperatives are articulated (this is not meant to be exhaustive):

1. **Involution Vs. Evolution:** *Shiva* represents involution. This characteristic stems from references to *Shiva* as the nothingness, out of which everything emerges. In mathematics, an involution is a function that is its own inverse, which can be represented with the formula " $f(f(x)) = x$ " for all  $x$  in the domain of  $f$  ("Involution," 2023). In ring theory, involution is customarily taken to mean an antihomomorphism that is its own inverse function. The *linga* is a sophisticated symbol of this concept that represents the formless most potent seed of energies that has the power to manifest the reality that we embody. In the *linga*, involution is depicted by the sign of the *linga* itself, evolution is symbolized in its union with the creative force of the *yonis* at the base. This is the seat of *Brahma*, the Hindu god of creation, out of which preservation is generated with *Vishnu*, the Hindu god of preservation.
2. **Convergence Vs. Divergence:** *Shiva* is the force that subsumes all energies into an eternal trance, which is also equally depictive of the divergent forces that define existence. This is represented most creatively in the *Nataraja*, where at one level, the *panchakritya* carries significant life lessons of existence as *Shiva* dances across the vast expanse of the cosmos, and at another level, there is the full convergence of the energies in the dark void within the dance of the energies of *Shiva* and *Shakti*. The dance starts deep within nothingness with *Shiva* and *Shakti* representing the convergence of all cosmic energies yet expanding and diverging outwards in a fashion that is eternal and never-ending.
3. **Microcosm Vs. Macrocosm:** *Shiva* is the microcosm, as seen in the form of a *Yogi*, who is in eternal meditation, where the human psyche is fused with the primordial consciousness. But he is also the *Yogi* whose vehement meditative oneness is disturbed by *Parvati* to transform him into a family man. Out of the eternal conjugal union between *Shiva* and *Parvati* comes their sons *Kartikeya* and *Ganesha*. This family unit, the macrocosm, is depicted in several art forms as a complete happy family that makes earth their abode. The primordial consciousness is now the universal consciousness of the world that is present in every life that exists.

See figure 6 for a depiction of the contrarian imperatives.



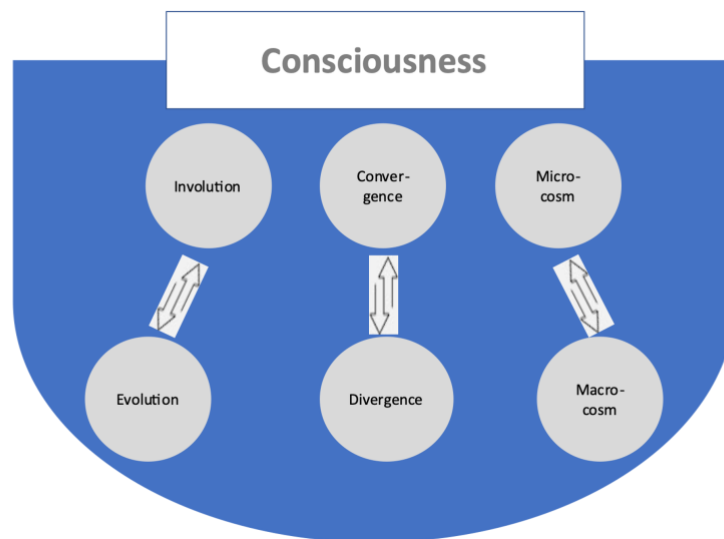


Figure 6. Contrarian imperatives.

It is such contrarian imperatives that result in the manifestation process out of the universal consciousness. With reference to *Kashmir Shaivism*, Tantray et al., (2018, p. 2) say: “Manifestation process is a mechanism of appearance (effect) from ultimate reality (cause) which is the seed or embryo of the causation.” Therefore, *Kashmir Shaivism* can be regarded as non-relational consciousness where the distinction between cause and effect, subject and object, and the self and the other is nullified. Similarly, Coomaraswamy (1918) talks about the determination of the eternal rhythmic character of the world process as the great antithesis of all dualities: “The interplay of these opposites constitutes the whole of sensational and [registered] existence, the Eternal Becoming...” (p. 10).

## Dimensional Domains

Five dimensional domains are identified. Based on the ontology of the contrarian imperatives, the dimensional domains are a set of non-hierarchical representations of our states of embodied experience. Practicing SL is about our engagement within the dimensional domains with an awareness of the boundaries we continually demarcate considering us as the decision maker, our resources, and our responsibility. I have drawn the boundary at the ecosystem level without engaging at the cosmological level, because I am conscious of the implications of this research that I would like to be relatable and translatable into practice.

Each of the dimensional domains exists relationally and dynamically:

**Individual:** This begins at the level of the self. It was probably the power of self-awareness, propelled by self-reflection, that was one of the essential drivers of a remarkably rapid appearance of human civilization 40,000 to 60,000 years ago (Leary & Buttermore, 2003). Self-awareness can also be looked upon as self-

consciousness (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Inner work, introspection, and reflection are practices that are widely proposed for greater self-awareness and development at the individual level (Boyatzis, 2014; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Goleman et al., 2002; Sullivan, 2017). It is at the individual level that we must draw from the understanding that everything we perceive exists as a vibration of *prakasha* and *vimarsha* that emanates from the undercurrent of consciousness that gives us the innate power within ourselves to know ourselves... to become self-aware. Self-awareness not only influences individual behavior (de Silva, 2004), it also enables us to appreciate the impact of our behavior on others (Palmer, 2014). Church (1997) views self-awareness as a cognitive schema, whereby self-awareness is seen to be the foundation for contexts and relationships. Therefore, although, initially, it may seem that at the individual level, responsibility rests with the self, it is not so. Individual reality is created in the dynamic interaction between the self and the context, which can be seen at the level of an aggregation of individuals for a common purpose, which I refer to as the team.

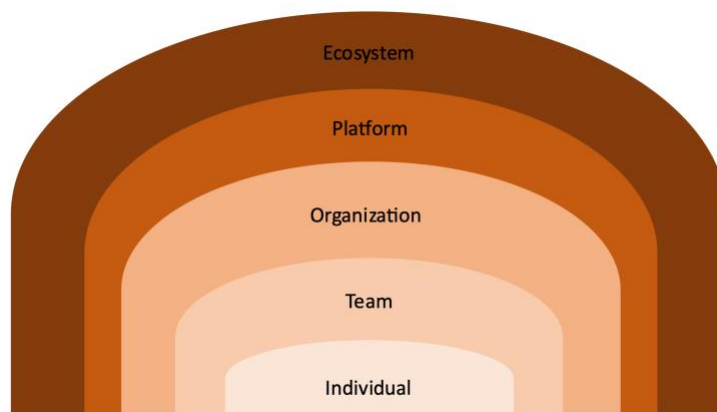
**Team:** We must allow our experience with the team to be a relational emergence of our self into a system of individuals working towards a common purpose. Every individual is a leader. The leadership model “changes the focus from a powerful individual, usually placed on an unrealistic pedestal, to a team of leaders who constitute a leadership system” (Kantor, 2019, p. 36). Drawing from Shiva consciousness, it is about understanding and working with networks and relationships with other individuals who are an extension of the self. To achieve the higher purpose, Scharmer (2019) argues that for every individual, three types of presence must collapse into each other: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one’s authentic self. The merging of the three types of presence leads to the resonance of a profound shift in the way we experience our contexts and realities that prepares us for the change that is necessary. This can also be regarded as “full spectrum consciousness” (Hollingshead, 2018). Conscious teams are more capable of acting with integrity and focusing on results that are more impactful and ethical (Hollingshead, 2018). SL, at this level, means that individuals must be sensitive to others within and across teams, give constructive feedback, shun bigotry and politics, and take full responsibility for the outcomes of collaborative actions (Hollingshead, 2018; Kan, 2019).

**Organization:** Several teams and networks of teams come together to form an organization. SL is about extending the sense of awareness and meaning from the individual, to the team, to the organization. Individuals and teams extend their consciousness-based values and beliefs to the organization through an active process of self and organizational alignment. Similar sentiments are also surfaced by Pandey and Gupta (2008), who talk about spiritually conscious organizations. At this dimensional domain, SL decision-making arises from shared agency between the individuals and the organization with teams acting as synapses between the two. Focus must be retained on developing relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathizing with, and supporting people internal and external to the organization. Such an approach contributes towards the enablement of compassionate and inclusive leadership (West, 2021). Several organizations are already exploring how organizational performance can be measured based on a consciousness approach (Nandram & Borden, 2010). In order to operationalize such thinking, leadership system must display “collective intelligence”, covering rational, emotional, moral, social, and structural intelligence, which can help an organization face almost every conceivable organizational eventuality (Kantor, 2019).

**Platform:** I use the term “platform” to denote the lateral existence of several organizations working in a similar or related socio-economic, political, and technological environment to pursue common, related, or interdependent purposes. At the level of organizations, SL is largely confined to the viability of the organization. But where do the boundaries of an organization start and end? This question can only be addressed by ascertaining to what extent one wants to see the effects of one’s decisions and actions (Chowdhury, 2019a, b). SL involves being able to sketch boundaries that are dynamic and constantly evolving across various institutions—social, regulatory, technological, and economic—realizing that organizations influence and are influenced by factors and forces that lie beyond themselves or their sector. SL involves convening stakeholders, enabling negotiations, neutralizing unequal demands, and facilitating agreements. This is an important step at a time when there is an increasing call for a well-being economy in the world, bringing together organizations, alliances, movements, and individuals working towards a common purpose to deliver human and ecological well-being (Coscieme et al., 2019; Fioramonti et al., 2022; Roy, 2021; Zeidler, 2022).

**Ecosystem:** This is regarded as the macro-level manifestation of all forms and orders of life (known to us): human and non-human, living and nonliving, the human as the creator and the human as the created, and the constituents of the world we are aware of, and those we are unaware of. I include the global commons—high seas, airspace, outer space, and cyberspace—as part of this dimensional domain, as they influence our actions that, in turn, affect them. SL provides the cognitive foundation to appreciate that this infinite and unending revelation of reality—starting from the individual self, to teams, to organizations, to platforms—culminates in the interconnected and emergent ecosystem. With consciousness at the core of the dimensional domains, the ecosystem is not something external but very much a part of the quantum reality that is also inherent in the individual self. SL, at the ecosystem level, calls for the realization that global capitalism in its present form is unsustainable—socially, ecologically, and even financially—and what is needed is an integral regenerative approach. This mesmerizing manifestation of the ecosystem is the evolutionary expansive macrocosm of the universal consciousness. Reaching the inflection point where one can dissipate between the macrocosm and the microcosm comes with immense and arduous work on the self. Reflecting a similar sentiment, Scharmer (2016) talks about presencing in Theory U as a process of “letting go, in order to let come”—the capacity to give up our most prized beliefs and surrender to whatever it is that might want to emerge.

See figure 7 for the dimensional domains.



*Figure 7. Dimensional domains.*

The dimensional domains are naturally subsumed within each other as centripetal and centrifugal forces and, very much, reflect the character of the contrarian imperatives. The dimensional domains are an open system where boundaries are permeable and non-distinct but they operate with the core

systems principle of equifinality, where the final state of an open system can be reached by the same or different initial conditions within the homeostatic cosmic system (Chowdhury, 2019a).

Having articulated the contrarian imperatives and the dimensional domains, the next section will present a theoretical construct for CSL.

## A Theoretical Construct for Conscious Systemic Leadership

A theoretical construct for CSL is presented in figure 8. It is proposed to pique radical transformation for human engagement, and to create lasting meaning for our actions and their consequences.

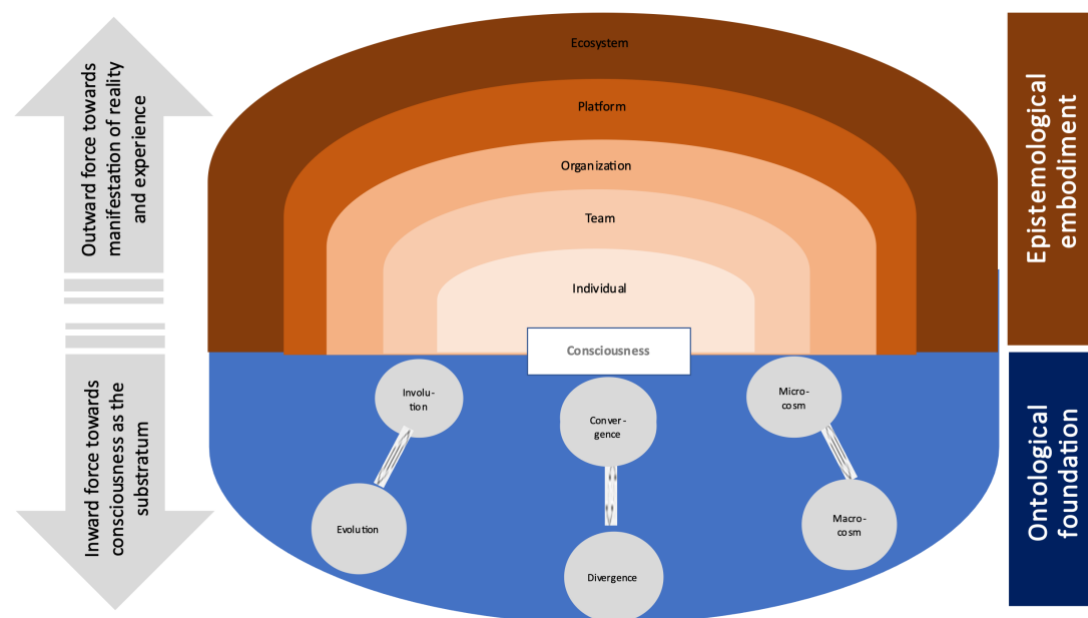


Figure 8. Framework for conscious systemic leadership.

I propose CSL, essentially, as a meaning-making process. Capra and Luisi (2014) explore meaning as a shorthand notation for the inner world of reflective consciousness. They further argue that understanding of social phenomena must involve the integration of four perspectives—form, matter, process, and meaning. The inward and the outwards forces represent the primordial rhythmic oscillation that creates reality as we experience it. At the same time, CSL reminds us that consciousness is multidimensional and that “our relationship to the outer, observable self (body, mind, and emotions) is the manifestation of our relationship with our essence and our relationship to the world around us (society and nature)”, a thought that is also prevalent in Sri Aurobindo’s integral philosophy (Borden, 2009, p. 166).

CSL will demand the demonstration of a new set of practices at the level of each dimensional domain. Crafting these practices in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am highlighting the following indicative practices as a thought starter:

### **Individual**

- Self-reflection, guided attention, and perception practices.
- Charitable work beyond giving donations.
- Interaction with people from different cultures, interests, and worldviews with an accommodative mindset, without being intimidated by uncertainty.
- Introspection and acting on how you want to bring change with your individual leadership capacity.

### **Team**

- Appreciating the purpose of coming together as a team and loving your team members.
- Valuing the differences that members in the team bring and recognizing the power of respecting and accommodating such differences, treating consensus as an emergent phenomenon.
- Welcoming and accommodating individual introspection practices and engaging in group attention practices; integrating nature immersion practices for the team.
- Critically appreciating if the leadership capacity of your team is palpable and what it means for you.

### **Organization**

- Aligning the organization's physical, financial, intellectual, and human capital to create meaning internally and externally for stakeholders who are involved and affected by the organization's actions.
- Developing relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathizing with, and supporting people internal and external to the organization.
- Inviting and involving people with creative capabilities, such as performing arts, and introspection expertise, such as traditional healers, to take part in the organization's strategic initiatives.
- Leveraging the organizational leadership capacity to affect the desired change internally and externally.

### **Platform**

- Reminding ourselves that the social, regulatory, technological, and economic institutions that we create serve our purpose, but

if they do not serve the purpose of social well-being and the ecological, our purpose will soon be defeated.

- Creating institutions and structures that convene stakeholders, enable negotiations, neutralize unequal demands, and facilitate agreements.
- Promoting Bohmian dialogue between stakeholders to experience everyone's point of view fully, equally, and nonjudgmentally.
- Reflecting on the missing gaps in the platform and mobilizing yourself, teams, and organization to leverage the collective leadership agency to fill those gaps.

### **Ecosystem**

- Respecting the sacred nature of our global commons—high seas, airspace, outer space, and cyberspace.
- Adopting a regeneration mindset in our social, ecological, and even financial approaches.
- Developing capacities to give up our most prized beliefs and surrender to the system as it emerges through our conscious efforts.
- Imagining the direct connection between yourself and the ecosystem, and driving your leadership capacity to prevent any harm to the ecosystem as a result of your actions.

The above practices are not meant to be exhaustive and distinct for the dimensional domains, but they must run through all the states of our embodied experience. The distinctions are made to emphasize on certain aspects of the respective dimensional domains.

## **Implications of This Research**

### **Contribution**

CSL introduces a new characteristic for systemic leadership by connecting it to consciousness, which is central to the realization of the full potential of systems thinking. Although the concept of SL has been much talked about in intellectual circles and adopted by several large organizations in the public, private, and third sectors, it has, until now, failed to make an impact on addressing the world's big challenges. Climate change is a classic example. We are all aware that the consequences of our lifestyles can lead towards direct harm to the environment. Political leaders are aware of the disastrous impact of their policies on the climate. Large industries are aware of how their actions cause direct catastrophic results for the climate. But we fail to make any significant progress

in the way we act and behave. Although in theory we are aware of the tools and frameworks that are needed to approach such complexities, the challenges we encounter are often a result of our inability to realize that we are all part of the larger system acting as its agents; that there is no “other” in this equation. The effect of the individual actions of each one of us is felt by each one of us.

With the integration of consciousness, CSL makes a new addition to the field of SL as the first attempt in the literature to draw on perspectives from Hindu philosophy, more specifically the *Shiva* consciousness, to enrich the SL framework. It also advances my previous work on connecting the *Shiva* philosophy to systems thinking (Chowdhury, 2022a), which was also the first in the literature.

Deploying CSL in practice will require taking into consideration a wide range of challenges. CSL must be introduced and engrained in educational curricula, through all stages, so that learners are able to appreciate its value. The private sector will need to adopt and promote it. Nay-sayers will surface, who will always want to look at narrow political and selfish economic agendas against the tenets of systems thinking. To make a real impact, a conscious change in mindset needs to penetrate into every level of society. This thought complements what Scharmer (2019) says about “vertical literacy,” which is the capacity to shift one’s consciousness from one level to another, from ego- to eco-system awareness.

## Future Research

To bring CSL to life, there will be a need for further inquiry. Systems theory and systems methodologies can offer the appropriate tools and frameworks for how to convene stakeholders, navigate conflict, agree on boundaries, negotiate on issues, and create shared visions through collaborative and inclusive approaches. Elsewhere, I have discussed in more detail how systems methodologies can be used creatively and flexibly to achieve outcomes that are more meaningful and responsible (Chowdhury, 2022b, 2023). Recent years have also seen the development of systems methodologies that are influenced by Eastern mysticism (Coll, 2021; Kim, n.d.; Rajagopalan, 2020; Shen & Midgley, 2007a,b,c, 2015). Future research needs to explore how such methodologies in systems thinking can be incorporated creatively and flexibly in CSL to realize this theoretical framework in practice. Further, it needs to be investigated if the researcher needs to be formally trained in systems thinking and methodologies, or if application of systems methodologies is a skill that can be picked up without formal training. Focus needs to be directed to understanding the challenges for the practices to enable CSL and how they can be overcome. Developing this research in the said direction will serve as the link between consciousness and awareness-based systems change in practice. Finally, insights from this new spectrum of research must be used to articulate and refine the capabilities and practices for CSL that I have, earlier, touched upon.



## Conclusion

In this paper, I worked towards developing a theoretical construct of what I called conscious systemic leadership (CSL) drawing from the *Shiva* philosophy. A consciousness-based approach enables us to undergo a mind-shift from the individual to the collective, from short-term to long-term, from rigidity to fluidity, from holding-on to letting-go, and from results-focus to learning-orientation. I began by discussing my motivation behind this research. Then, I introduced systemic leadership (SL) and built an argument for the importance of integrating it with an understanding of consciousness. This was followed by introducing *Shiva*, covering who/what *Shiva* is, the main representations of *Shiva*, and the philosophy of *Shiva* consciousness. The ontology and epistemology of CSL, based on this understanding of *Shiva* consciousness, was articulated next. The ontology laid the foundation for the articulation of the contrarian imperatives and the epistemology laid the foundation for the articulation of the dimensional domains. The contrarian imperatives and the dimensional domains provided the scaffolding to work towards the theoretical construct of CSL that was presented. I highlighted indicative practices that can help bring CSL to life. Finally, I summarized the contribution of this research and shared my thoughts on the future inquiry into the topic.

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Peer Review Article

# The Vitality Triangle:

## Navigating Just and Regenerative Transitions with Ecosystem Awareness

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### Abstract

How can we navigate complex power dynamics in our every-day interactions, while sourcing our collective powers for just transitions to equitable, regenerative economies? When in the course of planetary crises, how do we harness the powers of the earth and find our way forward through conditions of precarity, under the pressure of necessity, into a future in which we can all flourish? How can we expand our toolkits with guidance born of ancient wisdom, intersectional social movements, and personal praxis?

This article explores how an inner-compass, the “Vitality Triangle,” can help us cultivate ecosystem awareness as we navigate from the life-threatening conditions characterizing our current geological epoch towards just and flourishing futures. Informed by diverse lineages of thought and action and

shaped by the authors' experiences navigating just transitions, the Vitality Triangle is not a new theory. Rather, it is a practical, synthetic framework that directs us to well-established practices, methods and traditions that can help us navigate planetary crises by living our questions while embodying, embedding, and emplacing three principles of regenerative vitality in living systems: liberty, reciprocity, and integrity. Through a review of challenges we face in our planetary moment, stories from practice, and reflections on the origins, practical application, and pragmatic possibilities of the Vitality Triangle, the authors posit that this vital tool can guide us in cultivating the collective awareness and (r)evolutionary power required to repair harm, regenerate well-being, and co-create the world anew.

## Keywords

ecological wisdom, (r)evolutionary power, collective healing, collective power, regenerative economics, environmental justice, community development, systemic trauma, climate, resilience

## Introduction and Guide Map

Feeling lost is common. Especially in times of change and transition, it is easy to become unmoored, to lose our bearings. When in the course of planetary crises, how do we harness the powers of the earth and find our way forward through conditions of precarity, under the pressure of necessity, into futures in which we can all flourish?

As two kindred sojourners called to the work of building Beloved Community (Andrus, 2021), we are intimately familiar with the disorientation that accompanies devastating social and ecological planetary crises. As a practicing pastor focused on climate justice issues, Rev. Jessica Abell regularly encounters those who feel lost and overwhelmed. As a practicing planner focused on regenerative and collaborative methods, Dr. Elizabeth Walsh regularly encounters communities who feel the same.

Our paths first converged in 2018 when our shared commitments brought us together in Colorado around a Just Transitions Table of environmental organizations, labor unions, community advocacy groups, and the members of the faith community.<sup>1</sup> These diverse partners came together to transcend usual political divides and co-create a set of paradigms, principles and policy priorities all could support. This deep and relational work ultimately generated precedent-

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<sup>1</sup> For more about the process, see: <https://ibe.colostate.edu/regenerative-dialogue-for-just-transitions-in-co/>.

setting legislation resulting in a first-of-its-kind Just Transition Office in the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, we've continued to navigate together with (and in search of) various practices of spiritual and community development which nurture liberation and transformation, especially those that support the cultivation and integration of inner wisdom with ecological wisdom and the reciprocal and regenerative processes of democratic writing and dialogue. Currently, we collaborate through the Planning to Thrive Colorado community of practice, an interdisciplinary network of community developers, urban planners, and technical experts seeking to establish equitable and integrated planning statewide in Colorado.<sup>3</sup> Our intention in writing this article together is to share a framework and set of tools that have supported our own praxis with others who share similar commitments to the work of just transitions and regenerative community development.

While we write as human beings born and raised on North American soil who hold United States citizenship and dwell in white, cisgendered, female bodies, we also understand ourselves to be members of a global civic culture (Boulding, 1990) who come from lineages of Beloved Community building (Andrus, 2021) and blessed unrest (Hawken, 2007) that weave together inescapable networks of mutuality. We deeply believe that woven into the groundwork of American soil and societies are threads of mutuality and reciprocity that are rarely obvious but will prove essential to us as we work to answer to our better angels and restore the promise of democracy in perilous times.<sup>4</sup> It is upon these threads that we pull and seek just transitions from our economies of extraction toward economics of abundance, from our politics of trauma (Haines, 2019) toward politics of flourishing.

We know that we have been given “the master’s tools” (Lorde, 2007) to address “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) like climate change and intersectional oppression; yet we have also witnessed the traumatic effects of divide and conquer politics endemic to use of these tools. As Lorde admonished, “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house,” nor will they transform our differences into strengths or help us co-create just and flourishing futures. We are committed to expanding our toolkits with guidance born of ancient wisdom, intersectional social movements, and personal praxis.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about results produced through the facilitated process, see: <https://inthesetimes.com/article/colorado-just-transition-labor-coal-mine-workers-peoples-climate-movement>.

<sup>3</sup> For more about Planning to Thrive Colorado, please see <https://www.planningtothrivecolorado.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> We particularly point to the roots of the longest enduring participatory democracy in North America, that of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, upon which the U.S. Constitution was modelled. This democracy continues to be governed under the Great Law of Peace, Law of Regeneration, and Seventh Generation planning practice (Awkwesane Notes, 2005).

We offer the Vitality Triangle (see Figure 1) as one tool to support individual and collective navigation of just transitions from extractive to regenerative economies. The Vitality Triangle emerged through immersion in liberatory literatures and lineages,<sup>5</sup> experiences in community development, and lessons of integration and thriving that we learn from nature—the dynamic living systems of which we are part.



Figure 1. The Vitality Triangle.

The Vitality Triangle is anchored by a dynamic relationship among *reciprocity*, *integrity* and *liberty*, which we posit to be three key principles of vitality in living systems. When used as an inner compass, this heuristic calls us into dynamic guidance from powerful questions rather than directional arrows.

We both have found the Vitality Triangle to be a helpful wayfinding tool as we navigate the uncertainty of disruptive change and the complexity of power dynamics in a world shaped by intersectional structures of oppression. To introduce readers to the Vitality Triangle as an inner compass and a community tool, we move through four guiding questions:

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<sup>5</sup> We particularly ground ourselves in Indigenous scholarship (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; Goodchild, 2021; Harjo, 2019; Kimmerer, 2015; Lyons & Mohawk, 1998; Nelson & Shilling, 2018; Simpson, 2011, 2013, 2017), Black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 2017; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 2013; Suarez, 2018), regenerative design and development literature (Center for Living Environments and Regeneration, 2017; Fuller, 1983; Hes & Plessis, 2014; Regenesis et al., 2016; Sieden, 2000), awareness-based social change (Cunningham, 2021; Hanh, 2008; King, 2010; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013; Thurman, 1989; Williams et al., 2016; Wink, 1999) and social movements for environmental, climate, and racial justice (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012; brown, 2017; Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, 1991; Haines, 2019; Lewis, 2012; Movement Generation, 2016; United Frontline Table, 2020).

- Where are we on the clock of the world and what challenges do we face together?
- What gives life, and how can the Vitality Triangle guide us toward life-giving future(s)?
- How does the Vitality Triangle work in practice as we navigate what is ours to do?
- How might we bring the Vitality Triangle into future work?

In exploring these questions, we begin writing in a collective voice, drawing from a review of literature to situate ourselves in the world and the collective navigation challenges we face. We then shift from a descriptive and collective voice into Elizabeth's first-person narrative introducing the origins of the Vitality Triangle and sharing examples of its use in practice. Following this practical case study, we return to our collective voice, reflecting upon lessons learned from West Denver and presenting opportunities for the Vitality Triangle to support just transitions in Colorado and beyond.

## Where are We in (R)evolutionary Time?

Where are we on the clock of the world? North American (r)evolutionary and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs made a practice of opening community meetings with this powerful question. She found that by expanding our awareness to the long arc of co-evolutionary and (r)evolutionary movements, this question opens a liberatory space for fellow human beings to ground ourselves in the present moment, with an openness to possibilities for co-creating the future.

How we think of ourselves, our histories, and the living systems we inhabit affects our behavior, and we assert that gaining insight into the degenerative characteristics of this age equips us to identify the tools we can use to counter them. The first step in breaking free from inherited systems of oppression is to name them, and so we begin with a description of our contexts.

## Situating Ourselves in Time: the Capitalocene, an Era of Scarcity

In response to Dr. Boggs' powerful question, we begin by naming that we find ourselves today in a geological epoch widely known as the Anthropocene. For the purposes of this discussion, we make the distinction between an inherent human effect and the impacts of entrenched patterns of extraction, exploitation, exclusion, and trauma by referring to this era as the "Capitalocene."<sup>6</sup> Recognizing

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<sup>6</sup> The Holocene began roughly 11,700 years ago and contains all recorded human history. In 2016, an international team of geologists found that there was enough evidence in the geological record of profound anthropogenic change to declare a new geologic epoch had begun; they named it the Anthropocene (Carrington, 2016). Environmental historians coined the term "Capitalocene" in

that form follows attention in living systems (Scharmer, 2009), we review how this era is characterized by (1) the emergence of changes in geological form, (2) the acceleration of a distinct set of economic relationships, and (3) the dominant focus of human consciousness, all arising rapidly and globally by the mid-19th century with capitalism.

### ***Ecological Form: Degenerative Planetary Outcomes***

Environmental historians generally agree that emergence of global, degenerative ecological change (including dramatic increases in planetary CO<sub>2</sub> levels) accelerated sharply after 1850, and especially after 1947.<sup>7</sup> This period coincided with modern capitalism, a global phenomenon that emerged as a social system in western Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sachs, 1999). The Great Acceleration of anthropogenic change in earth systems following 1947 coincides with the advent and global proliferation of neoliberalism, a belief that government interference in economics is an unmitigated evil and individuals are the only legitimate economic actors (Lovins et al., 2018).

### ***Economic Relationships: Degenerative Socio-Ecological Interactions***

At its etymological roots, an economy is simply a set of norms (*nomos*) about how people manage collective resources through their interactions in a common home (*oikos*, eco). Human beings have successfully cultivated regenerative economic relations in the past and have the potential to do so going forward (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; June, 2022; LaDuke, 2009; Lovins et al., 2018; Mohawk, 2010; Thackara, 2017; United Frontline Table, 2020). The use of “Capitalocene” draws attention to the degenerative economic relations that have been amplified through capitalism: relationships characterized by extraction, exploitation, and exclusion maintained through cycles of violence and intersectional systems of oppression (Moore, 2017).

### ***Focus of Attention: Scarcity Assumptions and Capital Accrual***

Degenerative economic relationships have also been maintained through the field of modern economics and its institutions. By the early 20th century, scarcity became the central assumption of modern economics, a field of study focused on “how society chooses to allocate scarce resources to the production of goods and services in order to satisfy unlimited wants” (Tucker, 1995).

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recognition that the presence of humanity itself is not to blame for planetary harm, but rather a specific approach to economic development (Altwater et al., 2016; Moore, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> For helpful diagrams and discussion, see <https://humanorigins.si.edu/research/age-humans-evolutionary-perspectives-anthropocene> and <https://www.anthropocene.info/great-acceleration.php>.

Once scarcity is assumed as the nature of life on earth, by definition, there is not enough for everyone to meet their needs. As a result, to meet one's personal needs, one will eventually need to extract natural resources, exploit labor, and exclude others from access to accrued capital. As modern democracy co-evolved with modern economics, nations established political economies focused on capital accumulation, using police powers to protect exclusive property rights and propel economic growth. Within this context, scarcity assumptions coupled with a growth fetish<sup>8</sup> drive oppressive economic relations of extraction, exploitation, and exclusion that deplete regenerative capacities of living systems, thereby increasing scarcity and reinforcing scarcity assumptions.

### ***Scarcity as a Self-Fulfilling Belief: Vicious Cycles and Systemic Trauma***

Engaging under the influence of scarcity assumptions, we easily succumb to what Cyndi Suarez calls “scarcity consciousness,” defined as the “belief that the world holds limited supplies of the things we want—love, power, recognition”(Suarez, 2018, p. 13). When we engage the world via scarcity consciousness, we know that *other* living beings pose a survival threat to us; they, too, are competing for scarce resources. We close our minds and hearts to these *other* beings, justifying our right to survival over theirs. Entrapped in fear and isolated by our egos, we find ourselves in a vicious cycle of degenerative economic relationships reified by intersectional structures of oppression that perpetuate collective, systemic trauma (Haines, 2019; Moore, 2017).

This trap of scarcity may be one of the most insidious aspects of our era, for it is easy to see *not enough* everywhere. We assert that the dominant patterns of consciousness, relationships, and emergent outcomes of the Capitalocene era reinforce a false sense of scarcity, when in fact nature regenerates abundance itself.

### **The Politics of Trauma: Shapes and States of Entrapment**

To understand the pernicious persistence of these patterns of degenerative economic relationships despite decades of clarion calls for paradigmatic shifts (Daly, 1973; Meadows et al., 1972; WCED, 1987), it is helpful to explore the way systemic trauma shapes living systems and states of being in the Capitalocene.

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<sup>8</sup> We use “growth fetish” in keeping with Clive Hamilton’s (2004) eponymous book in which he argues that the obsessive (and even successful) pursuit of economic growth and increased incomes has not only failed to increase happiness, but also harmed the planet. This use maintains a distinction between the psychological development concept of “growth mindset” which is arguably necessary to shift our mental models.

The abusive relational patterns of exploitative, extractive, and exclusive economies perpetuate through cycles of violence and systemic trauma. Systemic trauma persists intergenerationally by shaping the body politic, as well as individual bodies. In *The Politics of Trauma*, Haines (2019) articulates:

Like individual trauma, systemic trauma overwhelms and breaks down safety, connection, and dignity in the minds, bodies, and spirits of individuals and communities. Collective survival strategies can ‘shape’ whole communities across generations. Certain survival strategies become embodied in cultural practices; some cultural practices may develop out of trauma rather than resilience (pp. 80–81).

Trauma is a survival strategy that can shape our bodies, communities, and body politic across generations. In discussing climate change, Haines also observes that systemic trauma extends to the living systems of which we are part. As Dr. George Washington Carver found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and many advocates of regenerative agriculture observe today, systemic abuse is deeply rooted in our soil, society and dominant institutions (Embery, 2018; Montgomery, 2012; Penniman & Washington, 2018).

In review, downward spirals of degenerative economic relationships create states of entrapment. Breaking free of these states of entrapment is essential for navigating our way from cycles of trauma into cycles of resilience. We can employ vital tools to disrupt systemic trauma and support regenerative patterns of consciousness, relational dynamics, and emergent outcomes in dynamic living systems. We need not be trapped.

## Precarious Times Require Vital Tools

In this article, we offer the Vitality Triangle as one such vital tool to help us disrupt degenerative economic relationships and transition into a politics of flourishing. Through a more detailed introduction to the origins of the Vitality Triangle and a case study of its application, we reveal how this tool offers choice and voice, direction and guidance. The case study and origin story of the Vitality Triangle are offered in Elizabeth’s first-person narrative voice, reflecting on her personal praxis from 2018-2023. Throughout this period, Jessica Abell served as an invaluable “critical friend” (Forester, 1999) and co-conspirator in just transitions work. We write *together* to honor the truth that we are not meant to walk alone, to make visible the invisible yet critical connections that support us behind the scenes, and to invite others into practice with us, experimenting with the Vitality Triangle as we navigate just transitions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Deliberative Practitioner*, John Forrester (1999) defines critical friends as friends who “care enough to listen for more than what has been said, who care enough to wonder about what



The Vitality Triangle is not a *new* theory; it is a heuristic that invites us to bring our attention to well-established practices, methods and traditions contributing to practical ecological wisdom. What if we were to collectively accept that invitation and grow our capacity for ecosystem awareness—could the Capitalocene be but a blip on the clock of the world, and human beings become known by our capacity to holistically regenerate wellbeing in the Holocene?

## What Gives Life? Introducing The Vitality Triangle

The Vitality Triangle first emerged for me (Elizabeth) in the apocalyptic year of 2020,<sup>10</sup> in response to persistent questions that arose through (1) personal heartbreak observing the state of democracy and ecological devastation at the time, (2) deep longing for life-giving practices of democratic self-governance informed by nature's principles and ecological wisdom, and (3) personal contemplation about the power of declarations emerging through my reading of *The Politics of Trauma*<sup>11</sup> and *Our Declaration: A Close Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* over that summer.

Recognizing the fragmented, polarized state of democracy in the Capitalocene, while also honoring our human capacity to learn from nature and declare new possibilities into existence, these questions surfaced:

*What if—in addition to declaring liberty as a principle of natural law—our democratic declarations also included two additional, complementary principles of nature by which we could self-govern?*

*If so, what principles of vitality in living systems could help us steer clear from mutual annihilation and toward collective flourishing?*

As these questions emerged, the specificity of identifying two additional principles felt important. As a student of complexity science, ecology, and social movements, I understood that living systems tend to thrive when they can self-organize around a few simple principles. Murmurations of starlings—one of the

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has been missed, who are engaged and collaborative enough to help, yet detached and independent enough to carry forward their own projects." Critical friends play essential yet often invisible roles in navigating just transitions; in offering a loving mirror and holding a gracious, compassionate, and appreciative space, they help us discover blind spots, honor our commitments, and draw upon our strengths. Elizabeth and Jessica have been such critical friends for one another since 2018.

<sup>10</sup> 2020 was apocalyptic in the way its tragic events revealed deep seated social and ecological traumas - from economic upheaval associated with the pandemic and devastating wildfires (Australia and US west coast), an exceptionally divisive presidential election in the United States in which the incumbent never committed to a peaceful transition of power. Widespread protests of racial and climate injustices helped bring collective attention to underlying root causes and opportunities for action.

<sup>11</sup> Somatic practitioners often use declarations as a practice to support embodiment of desired possibilities. Chapter 7 of *The Politics of Trauma* explores the articulation of declarations and commitments as powerful speech acts and offers practical exercises.

most beautiful examples of emergence in self-organizing systems—happens when fellows in a flock observe three simple flight principles. With only three rules to keep in mind, they can navigate together with mutual flourishing (brown, 2017). Most often for me, the best remedy for deep soul-ache and persistent questions is to get outside, return home to my body, and move into reconnection with nature. And so it was that I headed off in August 2020 with my partner, stepson, and adventure-pup, Charlie, for a weekend backpacking trip in the Kenosha Pass section of the Colorado Trail.

Reflecting on my experiences as an environmental justice activist, scholar-practitioner of regenerative design and development, and student of urban ecology, enlivening ideas and words flowed through my consciousness for hours, step after step on the trail. A plethora sounded complementary to liberty—diversity, equity, dignity, humility, unity, synchronicity, sovereignty, simplicity, complexity, serendipity, equality, fraternity, sorority.

Later, unable to sleep under the power of a bright, full moon, three principles that powerfully animate life in living systems clicked into formation, gently tugging at each other in a triangle: liberty, reciprocity, and integrity. Suddenly, I felt energy burst through the triangle and ripple throughout my whole body. There was something to this unity of tensions among these distinct, yet interrelated principles!

Reciprocity animated life all around me. The sun freely gave its gifts of light during the day, and the leaves of the aspens and needles of the pine trees gladly received it for their own nourishment and growth. In turn, they passed the gifts on through their shady boughs, protecting many other beings from the sun's alpine intensity, while providing clean, breathable air for animals like me. Moreover, as forest ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014, para 11) explains, reciprocity is the process by which living beings keep the gifts of life in motion:

Reciprocity—returning the gift—is not just good manners; it is how the biophysical world works. Balance in ecological systems arises from negative feedback loops, from cycles of giving and taking. Reciprocity among parts of the living Earth produces equilibrium, in which life as we know it can flourish. When the gift is in motion, it can last forever. Positive feedback loops, in which interactions spur one another away from balance, produce radical change, often to a point of no return.

As we exercise reciprocity—by practicing gratitude and connecting to the living world co-conspiring around us—we cultivate an *appreciative gaze* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Ghaye, 2010; Kimmerer, 2015; Macy & Johnstone, 2012). We begin noticing an abundance of gifts and strengths flowing around and within us, previously hidden from view. We begin recognizing the generous spirit of those who give these gifts and keep them in motion. We begin to remember that rather than being alone, we are in fact deeply connected in kinship with the web-of-life. The myth of scarcity loses its hold upon us.

Integrity speaks to the healthy state of an integral whole—where the whole is greater than the sum of its diverse, essential, individual parts. There are structures (usually born of tension<sup>12</sup>) that animate such life, allowing diverse forms of aliveness to find their niche and play their part without compromising the aliveness of other parts. On the Colorado Trail, ground rules offer essential structure, including “take only photos, leave only footprints.” Visiting human beings abide by these agreements and support the integrity of the trail community and whole ecosystem.

As we exercise integrity—practicing compassion and loving-kindness—we cultivate a *compassionate gaze* (Campt, 2020; Greenberg & Turksma, 2015). We begin noticing all the sensations moving within our body, greeting them, acknowledging them, and allowing all to belong. As we sit with our own suffering and hold it within the spaciousness of our compassionate gaze, we envision and invite wholeness and healing. As we grow our capacity to hold ourselves in awareness that we are but one small part of a larger whole of creation, we grow our capacity to include others in our compassionate gaze; eventually even those who we have been conditioned to see as our enemies. As we grow our capacity to envision the dynamic wholes in which all beings belong, we grow our motivation and capacity to alleviate suffering and enact liberatory structures (Cunningham, 2021).

Liberty honors the innate dignity, vitality, and freedom of expression of the diverse beings who contribute to flourishing ecosystems. Beyond the rights of human beings, liberty speaks to the rights of nature, and the leadership of more-than-human beings in ecosystem governance.<sup>13</sup> On the trail, human and more-than-human beings alike were all free to breathe, participate, prosper, and realize our unique potential as kin in the web-of-life.

As we exercise liberty—attending to our breath and practicing decolonial mindfulness<sup>14</sup>—we cultivate an *open gaze* (Hanh & Khong, 2002; Scharmer,

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King and Buckminster Fuller both emphasized the importance of using techniques to generatively engage tension to support integrity. As Fuller was known to emphasize, “Tension is the great integrity.” The capacity of living systems to engage tension and establish healthy boundaries has been a hallmark of our diverse and abundant co-evolutionary history. As King noted in his Letter from Birmingham, “I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth.” Tension is part of healing.

<sup>13</sup> For a beautiful expression of liberty practiced by more-than-human beings, see Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2015) chapter “Maple Nation” in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

<sup>14</sup> The word “decolonial” is used to modify “mindfulness” and highlight critical blind spots. Intersectional structures of oppression tied to the history of colonization are often perniciously hidden from view, yet persistently active. We also use “decolonial” to signal the importance of decolonial and Indigenous scholarship in supporting essential shifts of consciousness (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; Santos, 2017; Simpson, 2013; Smith, 1999). We maintain that awareness-based practices are essential to disrupting structural oppression (Cunningham, 2021). Yet, we also

2009). As we practice noticing, allowing, and suspending our automatic voices of judgement, cynicism, and fear, we cultivate our capacity to show up fully present, with our minds, hearts, and will open. With an open gaze, we can connect to our deepest, most authentic desires and the co-creative possibilities that want to emerge through us in the moment, individually and collectively in support of our co-evolution (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

These principles—the essence of vitality—began to settle within me. I sensed them all around me in the aliveness of my environment. I could find them in the patterns of my past community development work. I remembered them in stories from liberatory literatures and lineages. I could feel them gently tug upon each other, in dynamic tension and balance.

As I began to visualize the Vitality Triangle as a compass, I realized its cardinal principles must be guided by question marks rather than arrows. Question marks invite us to embrace uncertainty as a gift and keep ourselves open to adventure, so we may intentionally adapt and co-create together. Moreover, powerful questions catalyze insight, innovation and action by guiding our attention while inviting our curiosity, courage, compassion and creativity (Vogt et al., 2003).

Powerful questions can help us get *unstuck*. As Fran Peavy has said, “questioning breaks open that stagnant, hardened shell of the present, opening up options to be explored” (Vogt et al., 2003, p. 8). Donella Meadows (1997) asserts that this willingness to surrender to “not-knowing” also happens to be the most powerful place to intervene in a system to effect transformative change. The guiding question marks invite us to open our senses to the living world moving within and around us.

When we activate the three principles of vitality in living systems with powerful questions, we can expand our awareness beyond the limits of our personal egos and begin to see patterns connecting us to the larger ecosystems of which we are part; the Vitality Triangle supports shifts from ego-system to ecosystem awareness (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

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acknowledge that awareness-based practices can be complicit in maintaining abusive systems by making them more tolerable (Haines, 2019).

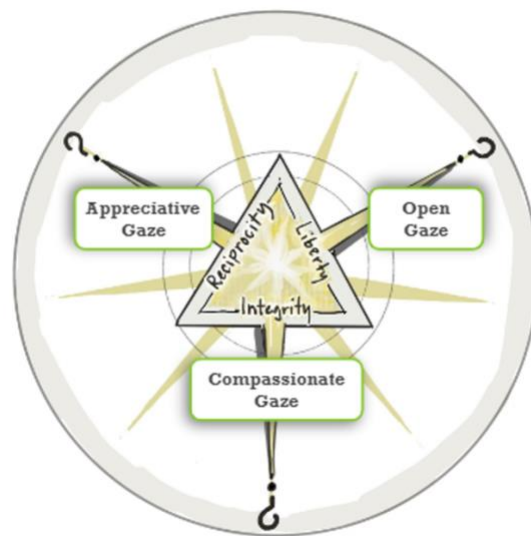


Figure 2. Gazes of Ecosystem Awareness (Walsh and Lane, 2022).

As we cultivate an appreciative gaze, compassionate gaze, and open gaze (Figure 2), we expand ecosystem awareness, increasingly transcend our blindspots, and see new opportunities for emergent strategy<sup>15</sup> to regenerate abundance. We can become part of the greater whole, not set apart and isolated. The Vitality Triangle offers guidance on this path.

## What is Mine (and Ours) to Do? Navigating Transitions

What does the Vitality Triangle look like in action? How can one use this inner compass to embody, embed, and emplace regenerative vitality into the living systems of which we're part? In this section, we offer a firsthand account from Elizabeth about her experiences using the Vitality Triangle to navigate change while living as a neighbor in the West Colfax neighborhood of Denver, Colorado, USA and shaping the West Area Plan through the City and County of Denver's Neighborhood Planning Initiative between 2018-2023. Elizabeth primarily used the Vitality Triangle as an inner compass to guide her personal praxis. Over the course of her collaborative work, the Vitality Triangle also supported the collective praxis, both implicitly and explicitly.

<sup>15</sup> In referring to emergent strategy, we center the work of adrienne maree brown and her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*.

## Embodying Regenerative Vitality: Showing Up as a Grounded Neighbor

Upon moving to the West Colfax neighborhood in Denver in 2018, I quickly grew to love my neighborhood and neighbors—and also became aware of the immense challenges we faced, including rapid gentrification, persistent food insecurity, and the hazards of a car-dominated environment. Drawing from past experiences working in contested, gentrifying landscapes with histories of environmental injustice, I began to discern *what's mine to do?* through active participation in my new home.<sup>16</sup>

In 2019, I represented the West Colfax Association of Neighbors (WeCAN) in a PhotoVoice project initiated by The City and County of Denver's department of Community Planning and Development in collaboration with the University of Denver (DU). This PhotoVoice project launched the planning process for the West Area Plan, a community-guided, 20-year plan for the future of the West Colfax, Sun Valley, Villa Park, Valverde and Barnum neighborhoods. Most of these neighborhoods have a history of environmental injustices related to past patterns of residential and industrial development.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the project, we neighbors gathered to share photos and stories in response to two key prompts: *What is unique about your neighborhood?* and *What should the city invest in for your neighborhood?*<sup>18</sup> These questions reflect an asset-based and desire-based approach to community-engaged research, in keeping with principles of reciprocity and liberty. This process cultivated ecosystem awareness in myself and others. Not only did I learn about nearby neighborhoods, but the story-sharing process also connected me to my neighbors in a way that allowed me to see myself as part of a whole. Months later, I even joined the DU team professionally!

And then, on March 17, 2020, the pandemic struck, quarantine ensued, and all was disrupted.

How does one create trusting relationships and community connection when even knocking on a neighbor's door presents a threat to health and safety? How can we build community and self-organize when we can't even come together around a table? Even if we could overcome logistical challenges and the digital divide, can zoom rooms substitute for in-person connection?

Each project I was part of required relationship building and powerful conversations; mandated physical isolation appeared as a formidable obstacle.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For an exploration of the history of this neighborhood's growth, please see <https://valverde-movement-project-dugis.hub.arcgis.com/pages/valverdes-past>.

<sup>18</sup> See <https://campuscitypartnerships-dugis.hub.arcgis.com/pages/west-area-plan-photovoice-project> for further information.

<sup>19</sup> For further exploration of these core challenges, see (Muñoz et al., 2021).

Physical presence aside, embodied presence also became a significant challenge. Fear and anxiety mounted as the pandemic unfolded, making the possibility of cultivating trusting relationships even more difficult, especially across lines of social privilege.<sup>20</sup> With the day-to-day emergency survival needs of households facing exacerbated threats of food, housing, and health insecurity, there was little time or capacity to move forward with the long-range, visionary planning or systems-change initiatives my co-conspirators and I had been planning.

I felt lost. Loss, grief, and despair settled into my body. Nothing seemed to work, and I felt powerless to make things better, to reduce suffering. As the apocalyptic year uncovered the underlying systemic structures of social oppression and ecological devastation, each action I took seemed inconsequential within the larger cataclysmic landscape.

It was while I was experiencing this abyss that the Vitality Triangle emerged during the hike on the Colorado Trail in the summer of 2020. Far more than teaching me something new, it became a tool that pointed me back to principles and practices that were already true, or self-evident to me, inviting me to remember. This remembering was beyond just a thought, inviting me to remember my way into connection with my body, my community, our home.

I quickly learned that this kind of remembering takes practice. Inspired by generative somatics practitioners Staci Haines and Prentis Hemphill, I developed a new somatic centering practice to support me in embodying the vitality principles and I began incorporating it into my daily life.<sup>21</sup> This daily practice grounded me and grew my capacity to show up fully present as a West Area neighbor and academic colleague, in zoom rooms and in person, alike. As I expanded my capacity to be fully present in tumultuous times, I became more adept in engaging conflicts and navigating complex power dynamics. The inner guides the outer, as we embody the world we hope for.

## Embedding Regenerative Vitality: Sensing as a Whole

Synergistically, the Valverde Movement Project (VMP) launched in 2021 as a collaboration of the Valverde Neighborhood Association (VNA), city and regional government, university researchers, and non-profit organizations. Through my participation as an engaged neighbor in the West Area Plan, I had cultivated relationships with all these partners. Through my professional role at DU, I helped convene them to form VMP. As such, VMP opened an opportunity for me

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<sup>20</sup> This personal experience was reflected at a macro-level as well. Natural and climate disaster may awaken what Rebecca Solnit calls “emergency hearts” and bring out the best in people, pandemics do not. They also hit the poor hardest and inflame class divisions, as David Brooks noted (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>).

<sup>21</sup> To explore these practices, please see [bit.ly/VitalityTrianglePractice](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html)  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>.

to use the principles and practices of the Vitality Triangle to help bring new teams to life and guide community-engaged, transdisciplinary action research within the Valverde neighborhood of West Denver.

Related to its history of industrial land use, disinvestment, and other forms of environmental injustice, Valverde was disproportionately affected by the pandemic and experienced the highest COVID19 hospitalization rates in Denver during 2020.<sup>22</sup> VMP launched to expand community health and wealth in Valverde through infrastructure investments and land use planning. Recognizing that new investments (e.g., in public transportation and green infrastructure) have triggered involuntary displacement associated with gentrification, VMP partners sought solutions that would support community-rooted health and wealth without displacement.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) awarded a CIVIC Innovation Challenge planning grant to a team of researchers that I helped assemble from the University of Denver and University of Colorado at Denver to support VMP through May 2021.<sup>23</sup> With this support, VMP partners set out to develop and implement an intersectional, asset-based, transdisciplinary, community-rooted approach to mobility system research and design, as part of stage two application for an additional \$1 million to implement community-identified mobility solutions. The Center for Civic Engagement to advance Scholarship and Learning (CCESL), where I worked at DU, was responsible for designing and implementing civic engagement processes.

In this capacity at CCESL, I employed the Vitality Triangle to embed regenerative vitality in VMP's organizational culture in two key ways: (1) cultivating a trusting and high-performing team of VNA leaders, students, and faculty comprising our core engagement team, and (2) guiding VMP's approach to intersectional, community-engaged research and "regenerative mapping."

### ***Cultivating a Trusting, High Performing Ecological Whole***

At CCESL, we are committed to moving "at the speed of trust" with our community partners.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, our contract required completion of a

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<sup>22</sup> To explore the data, please see <https://coloradosun.com/2020/08/02/valverde-coronavirus-risk-redlining-denver/> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html> and <https://www.cpr.org/2020/06/23/the-durability-of-redlining-in-denvers-past-is-shaping-coronavirus-hot-spots-now-researchers-say/>.

<sup>23</sup> In the summer of 2020, I helped convene a team of academic, community, and public-sector partners and write the research proposal for VMP through NSF's newly launched CIVIC Innovation program.

<sup>24</sup> The term "speed of trust" was first popularized by Steven Covey through the 2006 publication of his eponymous book, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*.



robust community engagement process within a four-month period while under quarantine in the Denver neighborhood hit hardest by the pandemic. The Vitality Triangle then became both an inner and outer framework for action. Navigating with the Vitality Triangle, we were able to move as quickly as necessary by building real trust.

For example, in hiring university students to work on the project, I explicitly used the Vitality Triangle to guide formation of our research team and its specific ethical and organizational structures. From the original interview process through our weekly team meetings, I used guiding questions inspired by the Vitality Triangle to embed these core values into our team culture, discover teammates' personal passions and gifts, and co-create structures to support our workflow. Cultivating reciprocal, integral, and liberatory relational dynamics within the academic team grew our capacity to cultivate such dynamics with our community partners from VNA as well. Embedding vitality takes practice.

Practicing *reciprocity* in the formation of our community-university partnership with VNA leaders, our research team named our core research commitment as the development of mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships with all community partners. We expressed our belief that actionable knowledge emerges *through* these relationships. We and VNA leaders acknowledged that power and privilege dynamics between academic and community partners are often challenging, and we committed ourselves to developing relationships rooted in mutual support, solidarity, and appreciation of partner strengths. Our academic team expressed our own concerns about research practices that come from a deficit-mindset and talked about how our asset-based approach shaped the PhotoVoice project with the West Area Plan, and in other projects. We also shared some of the additional gifts we anticipated being able to bring to the table, including translation support, website development, graphic design, and event support.

Practicing *integrity*, the DU team committed to designing all activities to contribute to the long-term strength of VNA, recognizing that as researchers we would serve as one part of a larger integral, functioning whole. Together with VNA leaders, we co-created a culture of consent with open and honest feedback and communication that we held in confidence within the group container. Early on, we collectively brainstormed ways the DU team could contribute to VNA through our partnership, including organizational capacity building, community building events, and joint flyer development and distribution. While Institutional Review Boards hold academics to a standard of “do no harm,” we committed to

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In 2017, adrienne maree brown included this term in her 7<sup>th</sup> principle of emergent strategy, “Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.” CCESL embraces “emergent strategy” as defined by adrienne maree brown in its organizing work (<https://academicaffairs.du.edu/ccesl/opportunities-students/knowledge-skills-commitments>).

working collaboratively and adaptively to contribute to collective wellbeing as a matter of academic integrity. Together, we also co-created organizational structures to support us in fulfilling our priorities. We agreed upon a weekly meeting time for zoom meetings and created structures for joint agenda-setting and shared file organization.

Practicing *liberty*, we created an open conversational environment where VNA leaders felt free to speak their truths, express their hopes and fears, and relay stories from the past. By holding this open space for authentic communication, we learned about ways in which past academic partners—even from our own institution—had betrayed trust and left messes in their wake. We also learned about VNA’s top aspirational priorities for 2021, including growing their *Hey Neighbor* e-newsletter distribution list, building community, expanding language justice in their multilingual neighborhood, strengthening a sense of identity around “Valverde Strong!”, and supporting COVID-19 relief efforts.

The quality of our early conversations and the capacity we and our community partners demonstrated for engaging tension with curiosity, compassion, and courage were essential in establishing a foundation of trust. Consistent follow-through, open communication week-to-week, and flexibility allowed us to intentionally adapt together in a rapidly changing environment.

When an opportunity suddenly arose to support a State-sponsored vaccination clinic, the research team rallied and designed and printed tri-lingual VNA fliers with a QR code to connect to an online form to sign up for the VNA newsletter. VNA leaders and researchers hit the streets to get the word out, while getting to know each other in a COVID-safe manner. Conflicts inevitably came up, and we grew our collective capacity to engage tension and respond with care and intention.

### ***Co-Sensing through Intersectional Action Research and “Regenerative Mapping”***

As previously named, a core aim of VMP’s commitment through the NSF CIVIC Innovation Challenge was to develop and implement an intersectional, asset-based, transdisciplinary, community-rooted methodology for mobility system research and design. In pursuing this goal, VMP’s academic and community partners co-created a culturally responsive approach designed to name harm, center joy, and build on collective strengths of numerous individuals and organizations, especially those leading on the frontlines of community resilience.

How we look at the world matters, as we know, and the acts of mapping social realities can not only *reveal* social vulnerabilities but also reinforce power dynamics that generated them to begin with (Wisner, 1993). Decades of social vulnerability mapping have made vulnerability to displacement legible, yet gentrification continues (Chapple & Zuk, 2016; Richardson et al., 2020). Critics observe that vulnerability mapping risks framing marginalized people solely as victims, while methodological constraints generally fail to (1) center community

knowledge and strengths enabling resilience, (2) identify intersectional oppressions and name them as such, and (3) advance community activism (Jacobs, 2019). These constraints limit the potential of vulnerability mapping to cultivate the collective knowledge and power required to address the challenges facing communities on the frontlines of displacement struggles.

To overcome the common pitfalls of social vulnerability mapping, we developed a set of “regenerative mapping” techniques intended to support development without displacement. As revealed through a more detailed case study of the Valverde Movement Project (Walsh et al., 2023) and reflected on the Valverde Movement Project website,<sup>25</sup> regenerative mapping techniques can help cultivate community connection, ecosystem awareness, and collective power required to advance systems change. While most of these techniques are not new, per se, regenerative mapping emphasizes that the quality of *awareness* we bring to our application of cartographic techniques shapes the quality of our outcomes. Shifting our cartographic gaze to include awareness-based practices that support ecosystem awareness, these regenerative mapping techniques include:

- Asset mapping, drawing upon awareness-based practices cultivating an *appreciative gaze* and the field of Asset-Based Community Development (Emery & Flora, 2006; Ghaye, 2010; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993);
- Story mapping, drawing upon awareness-based practices cultivating an *open gaze of decolonial gaze* and the field of participatory GIS to disrupt oppressive, limiting narratives and replace them with empowering storylines (Lung-Amam & Dawkins, 2020); and
- Promise mapping, drawing upon awareness-based practices cultivating a *compassionate gaze* and the field of restorative justice to contrast past promises with present conditions, enabling communities to hold officials accountable to well-intentioned plans (McSorley et al., 2021).

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<sup>25</sup> See <https://valverde-movement-project-dugis.hub.arcgis.com/>

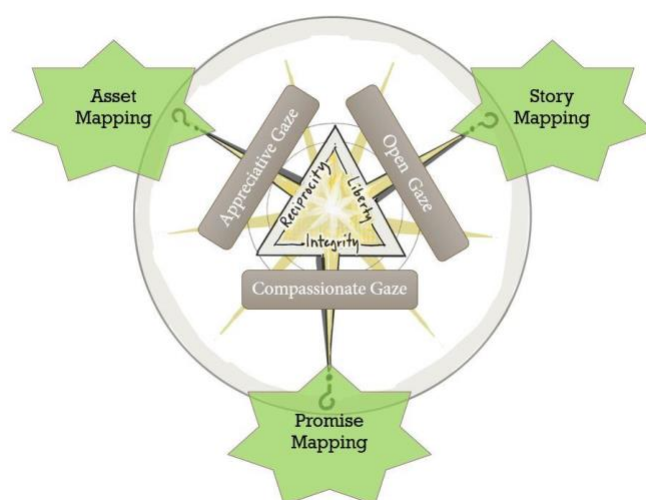


Figure 3: *Ecosystem Awareness and Regenerative Mapping* (Walsh & DiEnno, 2022).

These techniques (see Figure 3) came to life together at Valverde Movement Fest (VMF), hosted at the end of the four-month planning period. Held April 24, 2021, VMF was a COVID-safe, outdoor, intergenerational, multilingual community celebration attended by more than 100 residents, several nonprofits, and city planners leading the West Area Plan. Folklórico dancers, prizes, and free food from a local food truck set a celebratory tone, while interactive, intergenerational regenerative mapping and story activities engaged neighbors in collaborative efforts to understand shared challenges and opportunities in the neighborhood.

Although the Valverde Movement Fest was the culmination of the NSF planning grant, in other ways it served as catalyst for ongoing systems change, cultivating new relationships and energy for VNA and revealing new priorities. Momentum and insights from VMF also translated into a new collective effort to name a neighborhood park after unsung champions of the Chicano Movement and community-builders in Valverde: Elaine and Fred Ulibarri. Denver City Council adopted the name change on November 7, 2022.<sup>26</sup>

## Emplacing Regenerative Vitality: Enacting Systems Change

VMP's public sector and nonprofit advocacy partners joined neighborhood leaders in Valverde and other West Area neighborhoods in advancing context-specific priorities in ongoing planning and policy initiatives to catalyze place-based, regenerative systems change. This has been most powerfully reflected through the City of Denver's West Area Planning process, both in how the city interacted with the community and how the community has become engaged with the city.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.denverpost.com/2022/12/01/west-denver-valverde-neighborhood-ulibarri-park/>

First, The City and County of Denver requires an inclusive public process for all city plans, but city planners leading the West Area Plan realized that Valverde neighbors were significantly underrepresented in the public meetings, surveys, and other activities in their public process. By participating as VMP partners and incorporating findings from the CIVIC Innovation Challenge planning process into planning recommendations, city planners were able to ensure that the voices of otherwise underrepresented Valverde neighbors were heard along with all other West Area neighborhoods. Inclusive, equitable democratic process is what liberty looks like in practice. The VMP partnerships allowed a healthy, reciprocal flow of feedback.

Second, VNA leaders continued to serve on the West Area Plan Steering Committee throughout the planning process while cultivating cross-neighborhood partnerships for holistic systems change. More specifically, VNA leaders joined forces with other equity-focused neighborhood leaders to organize around an anti-displacement agenda for reparative and regenerative neighborhood planning. By September 2021, we were two years into monthly meetings that were almost completely virtual and rarely in a format that allowed two-way conversation with city staff, let alone deeper dialogue among participants. Community leaders began meeting together outside of city-convened meetings. We engaged in conversations spanning a global pandemic that disproportionately challenged the resilience of West Area communities and revealed underlying systemic structures driving long-existing health disparities. We were increasingly unwilling to “bounce back” to business as usual.

In the Spring of 2022, city staff publicly released a draft plan that appeared to follow a boilerplate template for past neighborhood plans designed to attract developers and private investment. We objected, exercising our liberty to voice collective concern. Speaking in a unified voice, we requested that city staff pause the process and revise the draft to reflect the community’s emphasis on centering equity and quality of life as the core goals of the plan. We observed that the Neighborhood Planning Initiative’s template was outdated, developed at a time when Denver was desperate to attract new development. The City’s new comprehensive plan for 2040 reflects public priorities for addressing intensifying threats of gentrification and climate change but offers no models or templates. An authentic West Area Plan would then not only support our own neighborhoods but would also serve other neighborhood planning efforts across the city going forward into 2040.

Perhaps in part because the planning process had been unusually collaborative, respectful, and trusting—even while engaging in difficult conversations about structural racism, climate change, and other wicked problems against a backdrop of political polarization—city staff responded by convening a Quality of Life Working Group (referred to hereon as “Working Group”). Through a series of eight weekly meetings gracefully facilitated by Senior Planner Valerie Herrera, the Working Group engaged in a deep-dive, co-creative engagement process. The Working Group tackled how the plan could

integrate quality of life priorities to address community-identified concerns related to gentrification and climate change. Harnessing our powers of curiosity, compassion, and courage while expanding our ecological awareness, we had the space to move beyond black and white thinking into nuanced, relational systems-thinking. This enabled us to generate concrete, strategic recommendations for catalyzing equity and ecological vitality in our neighborhoods for inclusion in the plan.

The Working Group also developed a ten-page “West Area Neighbors’ Planning Guide” to guide powerful conversations about the planning and development in our neighborhoods over the next 20 years.<sup>27</sup> We co-created the Neighbor’s Planning Guide to share our emerging vision of the solutions we really need—the solutions that make us whole—and of the false solutions typically offered, those solutions that may look good on the surface but fail to effect regenerative change.<sup>28</sup>

We recognized that we were privileged in having had the opportunity to dive deeply into generative dialogue about complex challenges, moving beyond binary, polarized thinking. We wanted to extend this gift to others through a guide to powerful conversations through which other neighbors could explore root causes underlying interrelated problems. To support this inquiry, we included a page on “Facing History: Recognizing Patterns of Displacement” which explored patterns of displacement from colonization and genocide to foreclosure and gentrification. In exploring root causes, we also wanted to help neighbors explore underlying patterns and principles shaping our economic relationships and collective outcomes. In articulating *what makes us whole*, we declared:

Instead of relationships governed by extraction, exploitation, and exclusion, it’s time to embody the principles of integrity, reciprocity, and liberty, embed them in our organizations, and emplace them in our neighborhoods (p. 3).

Thankfully, city staff responded appreciatively to our efforts. The final West Area Plan includes the principles we identified to guide the plan on page 11 [see Figure 4].

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<sup>27</sup> See “West Area Neighbor’s Guide: Opportunities for Reparative and Regenerative Development for the Neighborhood Planning Initiative: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ys0LQhicscOG1N7gm8EPTFF0O8Jj751C/view?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ys0LQhicscOG1N7gm8EPTFF0O8Jj751C/view?usp=share_link)

<sup>28</sup> We used the “Three Circles” tool developed by Gopal Dayaneni, Dave Henson, Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan, Jason Negrón-Gonzales, Mateo Nube, and Carla Perez through Movement Generation’s Justice & Ecology Project. See <https://movementstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Dare-to-Change.pdf>

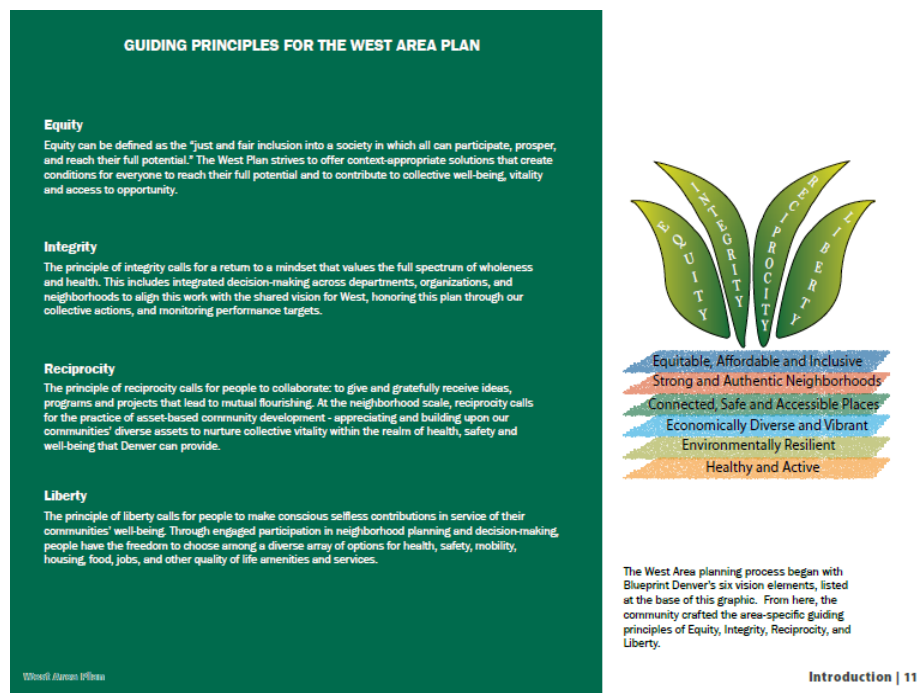


Figure 4. Guiding Principles for the West Area Plan (NPI, 2023, p. 11)

Adoption of the West Area Plan by a unanimous vote of Denver's City Council on March 28, 2023 marked a historic moment and represented the culmination of more than three years of an inclusive, equitable planning process. The West Area Plan became the first area plan in the City of Denver to (1) name past inequities arising from patterns of development responsible for genocide, gentrification and displacement, (2) prioritize strategies that redress harm, and (3) explicitly center quality of life and equity as the central aim of the plan and all its contributing sections. The West Area Plan brings recommendations that address quality of life issues associated with systemic inequality—such as food access, tree canopy, sidewalks and others—to the document's forefront, using them as an overarching guide for the rest of the document.

Recognizing that quality of life hinges upon ecological vitality and integrated planning, this neighborhood plan became the first in Denver to include an entire section devoted specifically to water and watershed planning, including recommendations to restore the South Platte River. Restoring the South Platte River will also ultimately require ecological restoration of industrial areas on the shores of the river in Valverde and Sun Valley, sources of ongoing environmental injustices.

Further emplacing principles of *integrity* and *reciprocity* in the landscape, the WAP recommends future investments in green jobs in a circular economy, as well as consideration of performance zoning to ensure that economic development contributes to community-rooted health and wealth. Moreover, as an emplaced expression of *liberty*, this plan recommends that inclusive, equitable public engagement processes continue through implementation, using practices like

Participatory Budgeting that can be used to strengthen civic infrastructure concurrently with investments in physical infrastructure.<sup>29</sup>

Through the West Area Neighbor's Planning Guide and West Area Plan, diverse neighbors asserted a collective right to pursue wholeness, above and beyond individual rights to pursue happiness or property. This declaration of possibility is rich in (r)evolutionary potential and, as an officially adopted city plan, establishes a foundation for new beginnings. Despite the effects of a global pandemic, climate change, and a politics of trauma endemic to the Capitalocene epoch, collective power emerged and began to take root.

## Reflections on Just and Regenerative Transitions: Denver and Beyond

The hopeful, joyful energies of celebration and culmination overflowed for those present at the adoption of the West Area Plan on March 28, 2023—elected leaders, city planners, and neighborhood representatives alike. Even so, all who gathered in Council Chambers and virtual zoom rooms were clear that after three long years of planning, completion of the West Area Plan does not mark an end. Rather, adoption is just a beginning as we work to repair harm and regenerate well-being.

We (Elizabeth and Jessica) remain well-aware that without ongoing robust collaborative action, business as usual will persist and continue to generate social inequity and ecological degradation. Much of the public testimony in Council Chambers invoked continuation of the positive momentum and rich spirit of collaboration and collective power that characterized the West Area planning process. These voices—diverse yet united—spoke to the potential of the West Area Plan to serve as a foundation for collective vision and action, not only for West Area civic players, but also for leaders throughout the city and region. As a piece of democratic writing, the inclusive, equitable process, big ideas, and long-term vision of the West Area Plan imbue it with potential and possibility. As an organizer of and participant in the statewide Planning to Thrive Colorado community of practice, Jessica sees the West Area Plan as an exemplar of the equity-centered, integrated approaches to planning Colorado greatly needs support just, resilient, thriving communities going forward.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The City of Denver uses Participatory Budgeting to implement concrete infrastructure investments following general guidance from other NPI plans (see <https://risetogetherdenver.org/hub-page/denverPB> for updates).

<sup>30</sup> In the summer of 2022, I (Jessica) facilitated the Colorado statewide Planning To Thrive Symposium and presented the final address. I was struck by the many on the ground examples of how planning had \*not\* been done with an equitable or integrated lens, and was grateful to present this alternative planning model grounded in abundance See <https://www.spiritualitycollective.com/planning-to-thrive>.



As inspiring as the West Area Plan's principles, practices and policies for repair and regeneration may be, does the plan really have potential to free us from despair in the face of global forces driving gentrification, climate change, and other manifestations of contemporary life in the Capitalocene? Do its anti-displacement strategies stand a chance, when the nature of urban development itself stands on entrenched patterns of displacement, dispossession and even extermination endemic to global capitalism, fueled by the legacies of Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery (Altvater et al., 2016; Fullilove, 2004; Fullilove & Wallace, 2011; Harvey, 2009; Hern, 2017; Moore, 2017)? These patterns all co-evolved with modern democracy and its conceptions of sovereignty and property. As Hern asserts in *What A City Is For: Remaking the Politics of Displacement*, "any attempts to ameliorate displacement are doomed if not rooted in an aggressively equitable and decolonized politics of land, ownership and sovereignty" (2017, p. 30).

Although the odds can feel slight against the principalities and powers that be, we remain actively hopeful. In part, we (re)source our hope in the (r)evolutionary principles and powers of regenerative vitality embedded within the text of the West Area Plan and the emergent culture of those who helped write it.

In our direct experience, the principles and practices of the Vitality Triangle have helped us and fellow travelers embrace our individual and collective powers to heal and create the world anew, moment by moment, movement by movement. We have found that as we work to embody, embed, and emplace liberty, reciprocity, and integrity in the living systems we inhabit, we increasingly grow our capacity to disrupt scarcity consciousness, expand ecosystem awareness, and cultivate healthy relationships. In doing so, we participate in upward spirals of regenerative development, growing our collective power in ways that generate abundance (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Upward Spirals of Regenerative Vitality.

Informed by literatures and lineages of living systems and liberation, we posit that the principles, practices, and powerful questions of the Vitality Triangle can support just transitions from the death spirals characterizing the Capitalocene's economies of extraction toward the regenerative cycles of an economics of abundance. We acknowledge that emergent properties in all living systems can be both life-giving and deadly—consider, for example, the death spiral phenomenon by which army ants get trapped in a circular pattern of pheromones and walk in a circle until their death.<sup>31</sup> The momentum of urban development can feel like this.

In keeping with many Indigenous governance traditions (Akwesasne Notes, 2005; Harjo, 2019; Kimmerer, 2015; LaDuke, 2009; Mihesuah et al., 2019; Nelson & Shilling, 2018; Simpson, 2011, 2017), we assert that we are endowed by our Creator with the capacity and responsibility to consciously choose how we self-organize in ways that care for all of creation. Consistent with living systems literature (Capra, 2005; Hes & Plessis, 2014; Meadows, 2008; Plaut et al., 2012; Regenesis, 2016), the Vitality Triangle offers a set of three principles to support reciprocal, integral, and liberatory relationships of care in self-governing communities. These are regenerative principles and practices that open possible pathways to decolonize our politics of land, ownership and sovereignty.

The principles of abundance over scarcity must be named, and we posit that the guiding principles of the Vitality Triangle can support practicing planners and other agents of systems change in making essential-yet-overlooked shifts in

<sup>31</sup> See [npr.org/sections/krulwich/2011/02/22/133810924/circling-themselves-to-death](https://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2011/02/22/133810924/circling-themselves-to-death).

consciousness required to cultivate the collective wisdom and power that supports thriving communities. This enables us to move from piecemeal incrementalism to systemic transformation through the individual and collective practices that support shifts in consciousness from scarcity to abundance. The seemingly unstoppable momentum of the status quo can be halted, and new direction from and of community itself can emerge.

## Closing Propositions & Invitations

Ultimately, determining whether a diagram is *true* or *not true* is an impossibility and waste of energy. The question is, does the Vitality Triangle prove useful to you and your co-conspirators in your pursuits of wellbeing in the dynamic living systems you call home? As urban planning scholar Scott Campbell (2016) asserts:

One cannot readily ‘test’ a diagram’s validity: Its primary value is to sharpen and change the way we think (and thus design, plan, and implement)... They need to be intuitive enough to connect ideas that were once unrelated, or compelling enough to displace deep-rooted assumptions. (p. 390)

The highest potential function of the Vitality Triangle, then, is to connect us with principles, awareness-based practices, and place-based traditions that can help us cultivate the collective awareness and power required to heal and co-create the world anew. Recognizing that we have arrived in the Capitalocene through proliferation of degenerative economic relations, we see pathways forward through shifts in our attention that support relationships rooted in regenerative vitality, guided by nature’s principles.

We are called to remember that the name *Holocene* was originally given to the geological epoch preceding the Capitalocene to mean “wholly new,” in honor of a new era of relative climatic stability conducive to diverse, thriving, regenerative socio-ecological communities. With awareness that the Holocene epoch holds all recorded human history, it is time for us to remember our way forward, embracing our (r)evolutionary powers to return to wholeness along pathways of holy, blessed unrest. We posit that the Vitality Triangle can help us remember our way forward through just and regenerative transitions, step by embodied step, moment by moment, movement by movement.

Small steps at home can feel futile, yet we posit that our everyday actions and interactions are where true power resides. Wheatley (1999) elucidates this theory of change in living systems, which Grace Lee Boggs has continued to build upon (as cited in Boggs & Kurashige, 2012):

[C]hanges in small places also affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness. Activities in one part of the whole create effects that appear in distant places. Because of these unseen connections, there is potential value in working anywhere

in the system. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness (p. 44-45).

In this spirit of connection, we invite—and challenge you—to experiment with the Vitality Triangle. Does it help you notice when you are entrapped in the politics of trauma or ideological certainty? Does it help you practice a politics of flourishing in your everyday interactions and navigate toward just and flourishing futures? We envision this compass as a navigation technology supporting a community of practice of diverse players seeking to co-create a just transition to equitable, regenerative economies. We invite you to join us, share your experiences, and intentionally adapt together.

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Peer Review Article

# Relational Design

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## Abstract

Participatory design occurs when professional designers do design work with the community members who will use the design. Traditional (colonial) participatory design leaves the choice of methodology in the hands of the professional designer, the leader or facilitator, who often chooses extractivist methods and methodologies, contradicting the very relationality, equity, and participation intended through participatory design. Using such methods in participatory design creates situations in which participating community members conduct extractivist, transactional methods against their own communities. In contrast, Radical Participatory Design decolonizes participatory processes as communities not only equally participate, but also equitably lead the design process, naturally leading to asset-based methodologies. Though Radical Participatory Design is a type of relational design because the design process is done relationally elevating relational knowledge and expertise, we go further to describe an explicit Relational Design.

What would a design process look like if we not only conduct it participatorily, but also replace extractivist, transactional activities with relational ones? Because design involves the production and solicitation of knowledge, we rearticulate knowledge as the presence of healthy relationships. With that understanding we describe Relational Design. We discuss the connection between systems and relationships and why Relational Design is important for positive systems change and impact. We then describe one possible and specific relational methodology that we have used in the space of educational systems: the sustained dialogue framework. Using this framework, we discuss how each phase of a generic design process changes when using a relational methodology like sustained dialogue. As the health of relationships in a system increases, the need or usefulness of positivist methods based on third-person knowing decreases.

## Keywords

decolonizing design, relational ontology, dialogue, relational epistemology, participatory design, power

## Introduction

I, Victor Udoewa, occupy spaces of privilege and a lack of privilege. I am a partner and father of three. I am both a Nigerian and U.S. American. I am a cisgender Christian male and a Black person from an immigrant family. I am from the Ibibio Indigenous group and my name *Anietie* is a shortened version of the question “Who is like God?” I have lived in high-income countries like the UK and low-to-middle income countries like South Africa. I have both co-worked with a professional designer as a community member and worked as a professional designer.

I, Savannah Keith Gress, identify as a racially white and ethnically Northern European cisgender, straight woman. I am a partner and mother of two. I lived roughly the first half of my life in Mississippi, near where I and generations before me were born. I lived the second half of my life in cities in northeastern and mid-Atlantic regions of the U.S., as well as in France, Rwanda, and Ecuador. I am the first person in my family to complete a bachelor's degree. I have experienced the oppression of classism, sexism, and ableism, and receive unjust advantages due to racism, homophobia, transphobia, colonialism, ageism and other forms of oppression. My purpose is to collaborate with others to end the systems of oppression that harm us all. Design has been a tool I have used in those efforts as a layperson.

We live on Catawba, Waxhaw, Cheraw, and Sugeree land in North Carolina and Nacotchtank (Anocostan) land in the District of Columbia. We honor these Indigenous groups on whose lands we work, live, and have our being. We share our positionality and acknowledge the land we use as a simple, inadequate

embodiment of a sacred holding ritual, from our Indigenous cultures, without which there is no transfer of knowledge.

There is a cycle between our ways of being and knowing and our ways of designing. Our ontologies—our worlds or realities or ways of being—are our epistemologies, our ways of knowing. Our onto-epistemologies are our namologies—studies, types, or ways of designing (Ibibio, *Generations*). In other words, our ways of being and knowing create our ways of designing. Our designs and the designed world then turn around and design us and our ways of being, creating a type of reinforcing loop (Meadows, 2008). Thus, colonial ontologies can never produce liberatory namologies that can resolve the crises caused by those same colonial ontologies and epistemologies—the economic and poverty crisis, the ecological crisis, the crises of ongoing conflict, and the spiritual crisis, to name a few. We need new ontologies, and the namologies, or ways of designing, will follow.

Radical Participatory Design is a meta-methodology through which community members outnumber the professional researchers, designers, and consultants; always lead; and own the artifacts, data, and outcomes of the work as well as the narratives around those artifacts, data, and outcomes. Radical Participatory Design does not use the model of designer-as-facilitator. Instead, Radical Participatory Design uses the models of designer-as-community-member, community-member-as-designer, and community-member-as-facilitator.

Radical Participatory Design starts with an ontology of relationality which then opens up relational ways of knowing—relational knowledge, cultural knowledge, etc. (Udoewa, 2022b). Radical Participatory Design then consistently produces, builds upon, and brings relational knowledge into the design process through the full, equal participation and full, equitable co-leadership of community members through the entire process and the storytelling of that process.

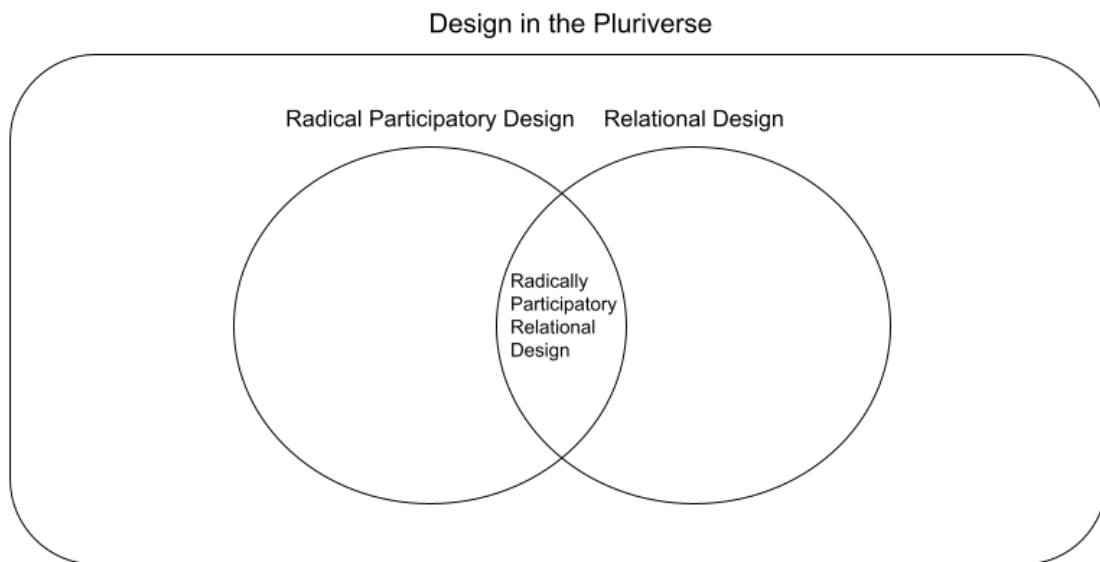
In contrast, colonial participatory design, what some call participatory design, still maintains a hierarchy (Udoewa, 2022a). Using the language of democratization, colonial participatory design does not only colonize the knowledge, but also the methodologies, of people groups. Professional designers and consultants use a participatory process with communities but choose an extractivist, non-relational methodology that the participatory group follows. The communities participate, but they do not lead, so the methods and methodologies remain unchanged—creating situations where communities use extractivist, transactional methods (e.g., surveys, observations, interviews, etc.) against their own community to make knowledge accessible for designers outside of their relationships! When community members lead, relational knowledge flows into the design process.

What happens if the epistemology changes the design method so that it is no longer positivist, extractivist, or transactionalist? What if every activity in every component of a design journey were relational. When this occurs in Radical

Participatory Design, the design approach moves from being a type of relational design to being explicitly RD.

The impact of deficit-based colonial participatory design methods on a social system is minimal, upholding subsystems of oppression. From our experience, it seems to have little effect on the system purpose or function (Meadows, 2008). Instead, RD shows greater possibility for healing systems toward the recreation of a beloved community of belonging. At the heart of all socio-human systems in which we desire social change, are relationships. Changing, growing, healing, and deepening relationships affect the system. We seek to bring greater awareness to this relational work.

The connection between Radical Participatory Design and RD is strong. When RD uses the designer-as-community-member, community-member-as-facilitator, and community-member-as-designer models, RD is a subset of Radical Participatory Design (Figure 1). However, when RD uses the designer-as-facilitator model, it does not fall under Radical Participatory Design. Both RD and Radical Participatory Design are meta-methodologies, approaches or orientations, not methodologies. There are many different methodologies that fall into each category.



*Figure 1. The relationship between Radical Participatory Design and Relational Design.*

In this paper, we briefly review movements of critical self-reflexivity and increasing relationality in design. Next, we introduce RD, not as a new argument, but simply a reality we have witnessed, experienced, a reality that is ancient. We do not use any Western, colonial methodological approaches but simply community-based and Indigenous practical synthesis through which communities discard approaches that do not serve the community well and traditionalize approaches that are helpful for the health of the community, like storytelling, oral histories, ceremony, learning circles, etc. (Smith, 2021; Ellison, 2014; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014). We also introduce dialogue as a

practical example of one relationship methodology we have used in RD work. Dialogue is not the only way RD can occur. We use it here because it creates a clarifying and introductory picture of one way RD might appear. Then, we show how any component of a design process might embody relationality through sustained dialogue and ultimately transform the component and the onto-epistemology upon which it is built. Lastly, we discuss the impact of RD and then share concluding thoughts.

## Movements of Critical Self-Reflexivity in Design

Work in relationality in design, of which RD is a part, contributes to an entire field of critical self-reflexivity for designers aimed at advancing design justice. Inclusive design highlights the traditionally excluded while values-sensitive design makes transparent the designer's relationship to values (Coleman & Lebbon, 1999; Clarkson et al., 2013; Friedman & Hendry, 2019; Friedman, 1996). The relationship to our environment is explored through ecological and circular design (Madge, 1997; Van der Ryn & Cowan, 2013; Medkova & Fifield, 2016; Moreno et al., 2016; Williams, 2007; Chapman, 2012). Speculative design, including discursive and critical design, opens space for reflection about our society and possible futures (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2013; Bardzell et al., 2012; Barab et al., 2004; Tharp & Tharp, 2022, 2013).

Equity-centered, emancipatory, and liberatory design, including frameworks like equityXdesign, help designers critically reflect on positionality, power, and equity (Anaissie et al., 2021; Guzman, 2017; Noel, 2016; Hill et al., 2016). Design justice uses an intersectional feminist lens; design for belonging focuses on inclusion, belonging, and collaboration; while trauma-responsive design focuses on trauma and safety (Wise, 2022; Costanza-Chock, 2018; Harris & Fallot, 2001a, 2001b).

Inter-human and post-human design has grown through community-centered design, society-centered design, humanity-centered design, life-centered, or planet-centered design (Clasen, 2023; HmntyCntrd, 2023; Norman, 2023; Rizo, 2023; Life-Centered Design School, 2022; Vignoli et al., 2021; Xu, 2021; Ishida, 2004; Lee et al., 2020; Manzini & Meroni, 2017; Cantu et al., 2013; Jawaharlal et al., 2016). Postcolonial, decolonial, ontological, and pluriversal design focus on colonization and its effects, liberation, pluralism in design, and the various worlds people inhabit (Wizinsky, 2022; Gupta, 2021; Leitão, 2020; Abdulla et al., 2019; Escobar, 2018; Garzon, 2017; López-Garay & Molano, 2017; Tlostanova, 2017; Mainsah & Morrison, 2014; Irani et al., 2010; Willis, 2006).

These movements over the past 30 are not new. As long as there has been colonization, there has been decolonial work. Before decolonization, various local and Indigenous groups have always practiced design like values-sensitive design, future envisioning, emancipatory work, and ecological design.

## Movements of Relationality in Design

Relationality through and from design processes, has been explored in at least three ways. Relational design can mean designing in, with, or for relationships.

Designing in relationship signifies design that happens with people with whom you have a relationship. This may include designing with friends, co-workers, or partners, and others you know. A good example is community design when a community engages in a project to design something for their own benefit (Comerio, 1984).

Designing with relationship signifies design that happens with people you may not know, but with whom you form a relationship while or before designing or in order to co-design. This is often a requirement when designing with Indigenous populations who embody the principle of respect as part of the 4 Rs—respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Smith, 2021). One academic researcher had to build relationships with Indigenous peoples before starting a decolonizing participatory research engagement with them (Stanton, 2014).

Designing for relationship signifies design that occurs for the benefit of relationships or with the goal of improved relationships (Akama, 2012; Light & Akama, 2014). For instance, you can design public services to improve the relationship between civil servants and the public (Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017; Cipolla & Manzini, 2009).

Relational Design (RD) is different from relational design and not focused on designing in, with, and for relationship, though that does occur in RD. In RD, we practice the explicitly different model of design-as-relationship-building.

## Relational Design

In social work with people experiencing poverty, I, Victor Udoewa, other social workers, and various communities have experienced a common understanding of the nature of poverty. This truth is exemplified by a thought experiment I have conducted with various middle-to-upper income people (Udoewa, 1995-Present; Common Change, 2002). I ask them to create a scenario. *Imagine if you lost your housing, your job, all your money. How long would it take you to find some food?* Most say a few hours. *How long would it take you to find a place to sleep and stay?* Most say by the end of the same day, at most. *How long would it take you to find a new job?* Most say in a few months.

I ask them why they would be able to find food, housing, and a job in those time periods. They all say because they have friends, family, or connections who will help them. In other words, poverty is not the absence of money; poverty is the absence of healthy relationships (Communities, Generations; Udoewa, 1995-Present; Oliver, 2010). In economic terms, poverty is the absence of healthy relationships through which resources, like money, flow.

Money is only one type of resource. What if the resource is knowledge? This allows us to rearticulate what ignorance and knowledge are. Ignorance is not the absence of knowledge; ignorance is the absence of healthy relationships through which knowledge flows. In other words, knowledge is healthy relationship, or being in healthy relationship within a community. This articulation is not anthropocentric; community includes not only all life but all creation, as we learn from healthy ecological relationships with the Earth and its various components and dynamics.

Radical Participatory Design is a type of relational design because it creates, uses, and builds upon knowledge while in equitable relationship with community members. Through community leadership, a Radical Participatory Design team often chooses asset-based methodologies like positive deviance, for instance. In positive deviance, the research and design team observes positive deviants in a community acknowledging that the community already holds and has the inherent wisdom needed to resolve a situation; the community does not need to be saved by mainstream, institutional knowledge brought in by the external designers (Marsh et al., 2004). The problem, though, is somehow the positive deviant knowledge or behavior of community members is not flowing to all parts of a community. In other words, there is a relational problem, based on a relational definition of knowledge and ignorance. The positive deviance research and design team uncovers the particularly helpful knowledge or behavior of positive deviants, propagates that knowledge to the entire community, and helps with community adoption of the helpful practices. The positive deviance team conducts its research through methods like observations and interviews.

In contrast to interviews and observations, relationship methods are methods focused on building healthy relationships. What happens when a Radical Participatory Design team not only works through equitable relationship but also uses relationship methodologies or methods throughout a design journey? RD is a type of relational design in which each activity or phase of activities explicitly uses relationship methods, or where relational design is done through a relationship methodology.

Design can be deconstructed into common components across some parts of the pluriverse of design understandings and practices in the world. One decomposition breaks into three components that can occur in any order, loop back, recur, and may last multiple years or a short moment (Udoewa, 2022b, 1995-Present). Any local practice or definition of design may have other and/or more components.

- Receiving or gathering information
- Receiving or thinking of one idea or more
- Making or trying those ideas

Each component of design involves the production, use, or flow of knowledge. What if each component were done through a relationship methodology? We will explore at least one way RD transforms the components of a design journey,

though there are many. Before sharing the transformation, it is important to understand three contextual notes.

First, RD is ancient. It has always occurred when communities have gathered, are in relationship, and encounter situations in which they must make design choices (Udoewa, 2022a). We are not introducing RD, but rather describing a reality we have experienced. We hope to avoid the colonial understandings of time, history, and discovery by assuming that because we write it down first, we have discovered something (Smith, 2021). Instead, we are describing an ancient reality that has always been with us, of which design communities have lost sight, partly due to the rise of the professional designer. Examples include oral history, griots, ancient birth control, folk medicine, experimental tool design of early humans, etc. (Udoewa, 2022a).

Second, RD is different from social design. Social design is an application area of design but does not specify any particular methodology. RD is a meta-methodology, usable with relationship-building methodologies, that can be applied outside of social design, like product or service design.

Third, RD is a meta-methodology. In other words, a Radical Participatory Design team explicitly doing RD might use any number of relationship or dialogic methodologies such as intentional communal living; regular, focused, intentional gatherings; grins; arenas; agoras; and dialogic methodologies, generally (Claiborne, 2016; Parker, 2020; Tsolakis, 2018, Dahlberg, 2005). The RD process can appear very differently depending on what methodology a design team uses.

## Introduction to Dialogue

Dialogue, like RD, is an ancient practice (Isaacs, 1993; Nichol, 1996; Saunders, 2009). It has been defined and practiced differently by many cultures: Setswana-speakers in Botswana practice *a re bue* meaning an inclusive, bi-directional conversation; Australian Indigenous cultures practice yarning to connect and make meaning together (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010); Indigenous peoples of the Americas have practiced talking circles; and the *agora* of ancient Greece included dialogue-like practices (Isaacs, 1999). We explore dialogue, specifically sustained dialogue as articulated and practiced primarily by David Bohm, Harold Saunders, and William Isaacs, because it is one starting point for relational design that we have experienced.

Dialogue has been called a way of talking or listening, a process, an art, a lifestyle, a mindset and more. We define it as a sustained experience of inquiry into individual and group-based assumptions out of which individual changes and new collective meaning emerges (Isaacs, 1993; Bohm, 2004). Below, we discuss how dialogue can foster healthy relationships by exploring four central characteristics of dialogue: sustainment, excavation underneath assumptions, change in participants, and collective meaning-making (Isaacs, 1993; Bohm, 2004; Saunders, 2009).



The first distinguishing characteristic of this form of dialogue is that it is structured and sustained. Groups are typically constructed of eight to fifteen (or more) participants with two facilitators who support participants in understanding dialogue and encourage the use of dialogic practices (Bohm, 2004; Sustained Dialogue Institute, 2022). Groups meet consistently across a few days, weeks, months, or indefinitely. This structure, in addition to dialogic practices, creates the container for deep encounters. Over time, participants move from engaging with one another superficially to connecting with one another's full humanity. The power of dialogue lies in what happens *in between* participants, in their relationships, as they become more than the sum of their individual parts (Buber, 1970). The healthy relationships forged through sustained dialogue form a strong foundation for RD.

Secondly, dialogue is not primarily concerned with one's viewpoints or rationales—as in debate or discussion. Instead, dialogue explores the thoughts that precede one's expressed views. Bohm likens it to moving beyond remediating pollution in a stream to seeking the source of pollution—the thought (Bohm, 2004). Importantly, dialogue does not ask participants to change their thoughts (Bohm, 2004; Saunders, 1999). Instead, the focus is on suspending, rather than defending, as the first step—observing the thought mindfully without suppressing, accepting, rejecting, or judging it (Bohm, 2004; Isaacs, 1993, 1999). The focus shifts from the rightness or wrongness of an idea to understanding it. Participants can then practice “inclusion” whereby they seek to imagine another's reality while equally holding onto their own perspective (Buber, 2002). The practice of unearthing and evaluating one's own thoughts suspended alongside others' leads to new flows of information and understanding that fosters the development of deeper relationships (Bohm, 2004; Nichol, 1996) and fuels RD.

A third characteristic of effective dialogue is that participants change (Freire, 2000; Hahn, 1995). Understanding and contemplating others' experiences expands one's understanding of the world and their place in it, leaving the individual in a different place than where they began (Freire, 2000; Goethe, as cited in Cottrell, 1998). A hallmark of effective dialogue is that one emerges changed, more fully themselves, after sustained inquiry in relationship with others (Scharmer, 2020; Sustained Dialogue Institute, n.d.).

Finally, dialogue fosters collective meaning-making that can shift tacit understanding (Bohm, 2004; Isaacs, 1993). By suspending the thoughts that undergird one's assumptions, what participants once considered to be certain may have shifted, expanded, or otherwise been challenged (Bohm, 2004). As groups explore what these shifts mean for themselves and society, they engage in what Scharmer calls “generative dialogue”. That is the highest of his four fields of conversation, in which participants have a greater sense of their collective whole and ability to create meaning together (Bohm, 2004; Isaacs, 1993; Scharmer, 2020). The result can be changes in the group's collective tacit understanding. Far beyond the change that can result from expanding

individuals' understanding alone, shifting collective understanding holds the potential for deep, lasting change because the knowledge we hold in our relationships determines our patterns of interaction in society (Bohm, 2004).

Out of dialogue, a group may decide to take specific action. However, whether a distinct action beyond dialogue emerges, change has already occurred. From their individual internal changes and collective shifts in tacit understanding, external changes manifest. RD is one possible expression of change.

## Conversational Approach

In the following sections, we seek to embody the relationality that is central to both dialogue and RD through a conversational approach. While we cannot reflect the richness of dialogue in a written conversation between two people, we do see an opportunity to embrace two aspects that resonate with our experiences of dialogue.

1. We transparently reflect the reality that we are individuals participating in a collective process of inquiry and exploration as we describe our experiences with RD. As in dialogue, we do not homogenize our perspectives into one but offer our views and experiences as part of a conversation.
2. We expose the thought processes and experiences beneath our assumptions, as in dialogue, to expose the roots of our understanding of RD, providing concrete examples for readers.

## Relational Design: Receiving Information

**Victor Udoewa:** In design processes, there is an information gathering component that can last a moment or years and can recur throughout a journey. In certain design processes, a research component comes after project framing in which designers decide the main purpose or aim, and determine or choose the research objectives, questions, methodology, methods, and recruitment strategies, if needed. What has been your RD experience?

**Savannah Keith Gress:** In my work with a non-profit using dialogue to strengthen relationships among caregivers, staff, and school leaders in public schools, I have observed RD starting with participants receiving information in dialogue. Dialogue groups typically span 10 weeks and include 10-12 community members who are diverse along lines of race, ethnicity, class, languages spoken, etc. Sessions support participants in exploring their own and others' experiences related to race and schooling. Topics often include the history of schooling in America, racism and antiracism, intersecting forms of oppression, white supremacy culture, the purpose of schooling, and liberation movements.

Dialogue facilitates information gathering by increasing and strengthening connections among community members. Families in diverse school communities

typically have asymmetric access to information which not only inhibits equitable access to student opportunities but also undermines effective RD (Murray et al., 2020). Even when relationships do exist, they are often not sufficiently deep or healthy to allow for the free flow of information. For example, co-facilitators and I often ask caregivers to share their hopes and fears for their children. Their hopes are often similar—that their children find purpose, are courageous, are compassionate, find a sense of belonging, and achieve their goals. Their fears, however, often differ based on identity. Caregivers raising white children often share fears that they will not self-actualize or be accepted. Caregivers raising children of color often share those fears and fears that their students will be emotionally or physically harmed by racism. Hearing those starkly different fears, participants often reflect on how they had not previously discussed those differences in racially diverse groups. They consider what it means that these different concerns have gone largely unspoken and unaddressed in the school community. This example highlights how relationships fostered through dialogue can open information flows about the full array of experiences in communities without any type of project or design framing that often precedes traditional research.

**Victor Udoewa:** I remember one community that met weekly for a meal and time of sharing experiences. We had no design intention or project frame. We all belonged to a larger church community that had an office of social work. Through that office, the church had programs for orphans, single mothers, students, older adults, and returning women citizens, as well as a tutoring service, legal clinic, health clinic, counseling center, an urban farm for the food insecure, a home for those experiencing homelessness, and women's empowerment enterprises. Before our community began, most members did not feel they could bring concerns to the elders of the church. Through our weekly relationship building, we made connections across lines of visibility and position at the church. Because of those relationships, someone in our group, who regularly met with the elders, introduced and negotiated the idea and design of an office of social justice. All the social programs helped people after they already encountered hardship, but the church was doing nothing to address root causes preventing people from experiencing those hardships. The shift in purpose to this justice-based direction came from our relationship building and learning from each other what was important.

What happens when there is no relationship? Continuing the economic analogy of poverty, donors give money to the poor, and both walk away feeling good, without true relationship (Common Change, 2002). Donors walk away feeling good they gave to needy people, and the beneficiaries walk away feeling good they received money. Because there was no structurally systemic shift, no relationship formed, the need will continue to resurface; a donor will have to give again; the person in need will, again, be in need.

Similarly, with extractive research methods like interviews or observations, the researchers complete research, happy they acquired information while research

subjects leave the research study, happy to receive compensation, gift cards or money, if anything at all. The research becomes a transaction, often one-sided. Similar to the economic example, no relationship is formed, and thus no structural change happens to the system. Even though the researchers and designers will go on to design something, the capability of that design to do any substantially healthy systems change is negligible. Have you ever heard of any extractivist or transactionalist design methodology fulfilling its promise of solving a social problem in society (Thomas et al., 2017; Vinsel, 2018; Kolko, 2018)? Even the problem-solving framing of such methodologies shows a possible misunderstanding of how open, social systems work in which we focus on system healing, not solutions. Extractive methods produce interventions that leave the system purpose unchanged in the long run.

Is a method like an interview always extractive? Even inside a relationship, an interview can be extractive. Extraction does not require intent to do harm. It simply means one person is mining a resource from another person, a type of transaction. A granddaughter asking to interview her grandmother for a school project may cause no harm, but is still extractive. The interview is being done for the granddaughter's purpose or need. One way for an interview not to be extractive is for the interview to be requested by the interviewee. In that case, it is not extraction, but offering.

All systems are made up of relationships. Therefore, any fundamental change to the system purpose requires relational work. Changing the quantity of deep relationships or the quality or health of relationships in a system, can change the system.

**Savannah Keith Gress:** Yes, working with schools, I have observed that as relationships are formed or strengthened, community members' sense of who is a part of their community expands, and then behaviors change to support that expanded understanding. One public elementary school in Washington D.C. had long hosted what some felt was a beloved school event and others felt was exclusionary and hurtful. Dialogue created space for knowledge about the impact of the event on different community members to be shared. From that sharing, the group chose to make changes to the event. However, the system shift was not due to the event changes themselves, which could have been identified through traditional design methodologies. Rather, the community examined their system of decision making. They reflected on the original idea for the event (the thought) to identify how it failed to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of all community members. They also reflected on the absence or poor health of relationships that prevented the flow of information about the harm of the event for years prior. The community learned and changed the systems (thought and relationships) that generated this issue rather than simply tweaking event details. This community was practicing what Bohm urges—looking at the *thought* as the source of the problem rather than just the problem (2004). The result was a system that more fully receives and values the insights of all community members.

**Victor Udoewa:** Working with community members, designers might start with the intention of designing and involve community members in participatory design. Or designers still begin with the intention to address a problem or realize a vision with design, but first build relationships with the community in order to design using participatory design (Rogers, 2015; Stanton, 2014). RD functions at a different level of relationality where the relationship building precedes any intention of design. Instead of design leading to relational work or relationship building, relationship building or relationship methodologies lead to shared understanding of community problems or a shared vision for the community.

I was part of a group in London that designed an alternative community for people of all faiths and no faith. The group never had the intention of designing an alternative community. We were just a group of people who met weekly for a time of sharing, a unique experience, or a discussion. Through those times, we built relationships with each other, sharing our frustrations, fears, hopes, and dreams. Out of that relational work came the idea for an alternative community, the design of which was a natural outcome. The power to create resulted from our relational work.

Relationship building leads to design. This has been my experience and observation in all my communities. The RD period of receiving information is very much like the academic, western-centered, research category of exploratory research. Unlike exploratory research, though, RD does not have a research question. Relationship is the aim, community is a product, and design is a natural outcome.

## Relational Design: Receiving Ideas

**Victor Udoewa:** In certain design processes, there are times when designers generate ideas. The ideas of what to create are often based on uncovered themes, insights, and patterns, and reasoned design principles from research. RD also contains information receiving (“research”), but as a by-product of the relationship. In a study of “expert” designers, Dorst notes that “expert” designers rarely brainstorm or hold ideation sessions; instead ideas flow from reframing the problem (Dorst, 2015). Similarly in RD, ideas emanate from the relationship.

**Savannah Keith Gress:** As relationships strengthen and knowledge is more fully shared, communities better generate new ideas and evaluate previous ideas because their thoughts about the problem are more fully informed. Frequently, families in school communities who participate in dialogue reprioritize more superficial collaborative efforts (e.g., playground improvements, fall festivals, etc.) as their understanding of their community’s full experiences deepens. In one Washington D.C. elementary school that was beginning dialogue, a caregiver shared her idea to establish a school food pantry or free clothing closet. Near the end of dialogue, she shared that by suspending her assumption that families lacked resources and learning from others’ experiences, she learned that racial

discrimination was a greater issue than economic hardship. She withdrew her prior suggestion and supported new ideas the group generated. This change can extend more broadly when whole school communities engaging in RD have reprioritized, re-envisioned, or re-purposed fundraising-related activities based on a stronger, collective understanding of the marginalizing impact of certain approaches (i.e., those that value financial resources over other resources) or as they better understand the problem they are attempting to address. This represents a shift in the purpose of caregiver engagement.

**Victor Udoewa:** There is something special when community members in an RD process do not suggest a particular idea because they know it would harm other community members. They suggest ideas based on their relationships and relational knowledge, without the use of personas, journey maps, or research-derived design principles. This phenomenon is the sustained, embodied, and embedded auto-empathy we experience in Radical Participatory Design meta-methodologies of which RD is a subset (Udoewa, 2022b). Because each RD team member either has direct experience related to the reason for designing or they are connected to another community member who has direct experience, the ideas transform from human-centered to community-centered or relationally centered. There is an embodied, unwritten design principle: What ideas are good for the whole community?

In one 50-member church community in which we built relationships through regular weekly, monthly, and seasonal rituals and gatherings, we began holding sacred conversations, similar to dialogue, in which we had sustained focused conversations with partners for months to learn about their world. Through the process of relationship-building, many of the native English speakers learned that the native Spanish speakers felt isolated or siloed in the church community; most events were separated by language group. The idea to combine the services and do everything in both languages naturally flowed from our relationships and led to the community redesigning the all-community gathering as one integrated service with interpretation in both languages. The relational knowledge flowing from the sacred conversations also exposed a deep need for theology centered in the experience of the native Spanish speakers from various Latin American countries. Again, featuring Latin American Liberation theology more prominently in our praxis and theology, as well as having people in the community from the background share and preach, flowed from the relationship. The situation happened again when through relationship and dialogue, white members knew that Black community members felt they were not represented in the musical genres. The service was immediately redesigned to include songs not just in the African-American tradition but with deep Black liberationist messages. This has happened time and again. It is important to underscore that there are many predominantly white communities that have not attended to expressed needs of minority groups in their midst; the redesign of our community happened due to relationship building, that both exposed problems to people who would otherwise be unaware and generated the idea of what to do. The greatest

example of this phenomenon was learning about the desire of some members to better understand the multi-hundred year history of the church. Based on that desire, uncovered in relationship, the community designed a participatory research project that discovered that the church was not founded by an abolitionist, but by a slave owner. This ruptured the mythology about the church's abolitionist founding. The idea to remove the name of the founder from various halls or rooms, create an archival history project to present to the community and city on the alternative history, and design a committee to advance our reparations work all flowed from intimate conversations and relationships which unearthed deep shock and hurt over false narratives. The work was recognized nationally such that our Associate Pastor was asked to be the Deputy Director of the Alliances of Baptist Churches in the U.S. to shepherd the decolonial, anti-racist work nationally.

**Savannah Keith Gress:** When ideas emanate from the relationship, they are enriched by existing knowledge about the communities' assets, challenges, histories, values, hopes, traumas, and priorities. Consequently, those ideas are more likely to be valued by, invested in, and sustained by the community. One Washington D.C. elementary school I worked with had recently experienced a racist incident among students. Dialogue participants felt that the incident itself, the school's delayed, limited response, and the divided reactions in the community were all fueled, in part, by the lack of deep relationships and shared understanding across difference. The group hoped that more members of their community would form authentic relationships as they had through discussing, sometimes with difficulty, the very topics related to identity and racism that had divided their broader community. The group decided to host a school-wide event to support conversations about racial equity and build relationships. Their shared history and understanding of their community's specific challenges deeply informed their design.

**Victor Udoewa:** RD not only leads to community-centered thinking and relational *ideation*, it also leads to relational *ideas*, themselves. This reinforces the authors' experience that relational ontologies lead to relational namologies. In one RD project in South Africa, I was a part of a 15-person community of multi-racial university students who met weekly to build relationships. Often members spent even more time doing relationship building in smaller groups or in duos throughout the week. We had no intention of creating or designing any community projects or addressing community problems. Through our relationship building, which involved eating, dialogue, art, and storytelling, we built a shared desire to spend at least as much time on other people outside our group through service than on ourselves through conversation. The needs that certain people felt or experienced in our community were sensed by all community members through our healthy relationships. We discussed, and everyone wanted to do relational service projects (where one builds relationships through recurring service interactions rather than one-off projects) in either homelessness work or children's work.

We identified several relevant projects. Instead of voting and satisfying some community members and not others, our relational care led us to look for and choose a project that encompassed both. We chose to spend time with children and youth at a home for orphans who had been experiencing homelessness. We built relationships with them, and then with those children and youth with whom we were relating, we co-designed and co-created a series of events and programs. Interestingly, instead of brainstorming and designing one-off events and programs, the youth and our community group designed relational service projects like mentoring younger children. Relationship building in our community group led to the RD of relational service programming with orphan youth experiencing homelessness. The relational work with the youth led to the relational co-design of relational service projects like mentoring and arts co-creation programming with children. This was not planned, just a natural outcome of authentic relationships.

## Relational Design: Making Ideas

**Victor Udoewa:** In many design processes, after conceiving of an idea, design teams build the idea or a component of the idea. They focus on shipping a prototype, service, or product to the world to learn as the world uses it, and then to iterate. In RD, prototyping, testing, and implementation of an idea is transformed into both an external process, doing and making things outside of our bodies, and an internal process, dealing with the interiority of individuals and the community. In RD, there is an implicit order: the interior process takes priority affecting the outer making-and-doing process. What have you experienced?

**Savannah Keith Gress:** At the previously mentioned Washington D.C. elementary school that gained a fuller understanding of the impact of its annual event on the whole community, the change process was both internal and external. The community could have chosen to view the feedback that the event was exclusionary and hurtful as simply highlighting a miscommunication. Their response might have been to more vociferously communicate the *intentions* behind their choices without adjusting the event. Instead, there was an internal change. The community acknowledged that the perspectives that were considered when creating the event did not fully reflect the community and that their relationships were not sufficiently broad or deep to receive the feedback. They collectively changed their understanding of the problem. After the internal change, the group made external changes to the event including renaming it—a shift in power—and more ways for community members to engage beyond financial contributions.

**Victor Udoewa:** In one RD project, we used weekly community dinners to build relationships among 20 people. From that work we designed and built a community choir. Due to the knowledge of our experiences and the racial power imbalances in South African institutions including many churches, we ensured



the choir sang in multiple languages, included music from African Indigenous groups, included majority non-white soloists, and was conducted by a non-white person for greater inclusion, accessibility, and equity. Seeing non-white leadership of a choir in the church and hearing their language sung was a source of empowerment for the community.

The choir design we tested is a pattern across RD projects in which the internal relational process affects the external product, service, or outcome through the creation of a prototype. Design teams generally try to create minimum viable prototypes that are somewhat functional, reliable, usable, and delightful (Marchand, 2022; Ritter & Winterbottom, 2017). In RD, when the bonds of healthy relationships are present, facilitating the flow of resources, team members tend to create services, campaigns, products, etc. that are inclusive, equitable, just, and accessible. In other words, the minimum viable prototype becomes a minimally exclusive, viably equitable prototype (MeVeP).

**Savannah Keith Gress:** One dual-language public school community confronted different needs and values when creating a MeVeP for their parent-teacher association (PTA). Dialogue fostered stronger relationships between bilingual and English-dominant caregivers who regularly participated in the PTA and those who had chosen not to engage in that way, including Spanish-dominant caregivers. Through those relationships, information flowed about how Spanish-dominant caregivers often felt marginalized by the PTA's approach to interpretation. Spanish interpretation was only provided if attendees responded "yes" to the question, "Does anyone need interpretation?", which put undue pressure and attention on those caregivers. So, the group considered alternatives. Their MeVeP was providing interpretation during all PTA meetings, regardless of who attended, acknowledging that all families in their dual-language community deserved equal access to such spaces.

Some caregivers raised a concern that this approach could be in tension with the value of efficiency. However, knowledge also flowed through these relationships about the experience of Spanish-dominant families and the value of ensuring fair access for all families. Ultimately, they chose to expand interpretation and maximize accessibility even if meetings lasted longer or covered less content. Implementing their idea through RD allowed this community to confront differing needs and values. In doing so, the community removed a barrier to healthy relationships across languages that could improve the flow of information and contribute to future cycles of RD.

**Victor Udoewa:** Without the design process being led by a professional designer, I have experienced and observed multiple instances of communities trying to address problems with a project, its design, or implementation, by building relationships. This seems counterintuitive from a Western, academic lens which tends to focus on the problem directly. Focusing on relationships, however, demonstrates a relational systems thinking view, even if subconsciously (Goodchild, 2021, 2022). In a project to design a racially just PTA

at my child's school, we started with dialogue groups of caregivers. In the design phase, a few parents, frustrated with the progress on creating the equitable PTA community, suggested we needed a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion through more interactions and relationships.

Through autonomous design, they started a new initiative of our emerging PTA focused on inclusion and creating events to bring people together. Events may not have been the best way to profoundly deepen individual relationships, yet, the choice to focus on building relationships and community in order to resolve PTA problems demonstrates a relationality that has entered into the thinking and ways of being of our emerging community that began with group dialogues.

The story also highlights the circularity of any RD process. The fundamental relationship methodologies are not just research methodologies at the beginning of a project. Relationship building and relationship methodologies can improve any component of an RD process. Deeper, healthy relationships help us better implement or create what we imagine and receive more ideas or more information. All work done through and on the foundation of relationships, in any phase, helps to deepen those relationships.

RD not only precedes the initiation of a project, but also succeeds the end of a project after implementation. Because the design project is not the goal but an outcome of the relationships, the relationships persist. Because the relationships continue, they lead to other design projects based on other shared visions, assets, needs, or problems. The cyclical and parallel nature of RD means that the phase of implementing a community idea benefits from the chemistry and relational history of community members who have worked with each other before on projects.

I have a current unfunded, voluntary RD community that decided to meet weekly to share a meal, tell stories, and learn about each other. These convenings led to a shared sense of the issues in our city and a decision to do relational service work in the area of children's education and hunger. That relational service experience gave us more opportunities to learn about each other, affirming the gifts and talents we saw in each other in the midst of our weekly, relational work in children's art education and food services. Later when the teachers and kids in our group voiced what they saw in their schools and the parents in the group shared similar understandings, which others who lived in communities with schools affirmed, we decided to work on education inequality and school integration. We knew who was excellent at researching with which city officials we should talk, who was good at facilitating workshop sessions, who had more time to attend education meetings across the city, etc. We were better able to offer tasks to people in alignment with availability, interests, and skills. We made decisions more quickly. Group members raised concerns that other members would have, such as the fact that public charter schools contribute to gentrification which everyone in our group did not know originally. In short, we knew each other better, and it affected our operations. We did our RD work

better. Of course, communities can change over time through deaths, births, schedule changes, arrivals, departures, etc. Still, in as much as a person has worked with another community member in the past, that person is able to build upon the previous and current relationship and growth while working together.

## Challenges

**Victor Udoewa:** What challenges have you encountered conducting RD?

**Savannah Keith Gress:** Power asymmetries can challenge RD by stifling the expression of information, undermining the valuing or understanding of information. This includes differences in formal power or in informal ways power manifests in relationships. In dialogue, forming a group with participants who hold different levels of formal power within a company, for example, is difficult to do well because the assumptions of those with higher rank tend to be imposed upon the group (Bohm, 2004). Hierarchies are not *necessarily* problematic, but special attention must be paid to their potential impact on the flow of information.

Dialogue participants from a diversity of backgrounds have a robust set of perspectives that enriches the design process. However, they must pay special attention to informal power dynamics. Intersecting forms of oppression can make communicating or understanding knowledge transmitted across different lived experiences difficult. If the dominant group fails to acknowledge how their assumptions may be based on their dominance (e.g., men failing to see how some assumptions are not informed by experiences of misogyny), it blocks the group from meaningfully considering one another's thoughts. Oppressive ways of engaging (i.e., men interrupting women, white people receiving credit for an idea previously shared by a person of color, etc.) impede trust formation, prevent free flows of information, and perpetuate harm. Other political norms, though desirable by other measures, may limit free flows of information such as respect for one's elders. Transactional relationships also create barriers to the free flow of information as motivation to share difficult, sensitive, or personal knowledge can be low.

Awareness of power dynamics is key to addressing them. Once aware of power dynamics, community members may then choose to explicitly name the dynamic (e.g., junior employees being reserved around their bosses, concerns about oppression being dismissed by less-affected groups, etc.) and invite collaborative problem solving. Alternatively, communities may deepen their understanding of the issue in affinity groups before working to resolve it as a community. Or community facilitators may identify and interrupt limiting or harmful behaviors in which power undermines the community's capacity for relational design.

Relational design requires thinking not only about the relationships within the community but the relationships with proximate communities. This is particularly important for homogenous groups. Homogenous groups can design what is both beneficial to their group and—intentionally or unintentionally—

harmful for other groups (e.g., adults with limited or no childcare responsibilities establishing events logistics that present barriers for caregivers, racially segregated communities creating policies that harm other racial or ethnic groups, etc.). When a homogenous group has more power, formal or informal, its members must carefully consider the thoughts and assumptions behind their understanding of the problem or opportunity and their response. They must diligently evaluate potential negative impacts of designing without information flowing freely from the wider community. Communities will benefit from understanding outside perspectives even if the community's values, needs, and desires are ultimately elevated over external groups'.

**Victor Udoewa:** How a professional designer starts practicing RD is another challenge. A familiar option is to serve as the facilitator for a community group that is practicing RD.

To practice the Radical Participatory Design version of RD, there are three options. The most familiar option may be to consider a Community-Driven Design version of RD in which the RD community team calls in a professional designer for specific, focused help at a specific point in time. A possibly more difficult option is a Radical Participatory Design team that is equitably co-leading an RD process with a professional designer. In that case, the ultimate control or decision-making still belongs to the community.

The easiest entry point to experience the designer-as-community-member model of Radical Participatory Design version of RD is in a non-work community in which you are already a member. The designer's professional identity and colonial design expertise are less inclined to take over the process in the regular non-work setting. When joining a new community to practice RD, beware of RD immediately converting into an extractivist design framework. If professional designers only join a community to practice RD in order to gather information and then leave that community, they are practicing transactional design. Only join communities in which you have a genuine interest and intent to be an on-going community member.

## Evaluating Relational Design

**Savannah Keith Gress:** If a community team passes through all those challenges, how do they know the process was truly, deeply, and healthily relational?

**Victor Udoewa:** As a subset of Radical Participatory Design, RD can use the same type of principles-based evaluation criterion question (Patton, 2017): Have a majority of the design or research team members experienced a sustained or sustainable shift in power?

**Savannah Keith Gress:** Additionally, or in place of that question, teams can ask a different question.

*Have a majority of the design and research team members experienced a sustained and sustainable increase in the quality and depth of relationships across differences of experience or in the number of deep relationships across differences of experience?* In certain groups, differences of experience will emerge from differences in aspects of identity. In seemingly homogeneous groups, the differences in experience may emerge from unique perspectives or individual experiences. In either case, the quality and depth of relationships are improving or the number of deep relationships are improving as knowledge flows.

**Victor Udoewa:** We have also asked another.

*Have a majority of the design and research team members experienced a sustained and sustainable shift in resource-based power?* Often the problem with many socio-economic integration programs is that the goal is diversity across socio-economic classes. However, if groups of people build truly deep relationships across class, resources should flow and those differences should slowly diminish. One sign that RD is being truly radically relational, is that resource landscapes are changing (knowledge in a knowledge economy, finances in a financial economy, etc.). Even if one is a design team member who is giving up power and money to people she now calls true friends, she is also gaining knowledge, connections, and help through relationships. This is an exchange of mutuality even if the same resource is not being shared in all directions.

**Savannah Keith Gress:** An example of an RD project that did not meet these conditions and was not radically relational, is one where a community of caregivers was working to create a racially just PTA. The project began with community members participating in two dialogue groups. However, over the course of the 10 weeks in dialogue, all Spanish-dominant caregivers withdrew from the groups due to changes in schedules, jobs, and interest. Additionally, the onset of the pandemic necessitated a sudden shift to conducting dialogue virtually which made establishing the same level of connection as in-person dialogue challenging. In the end, the dialogue groups failed to include a vital subcommunity within the school; most relationships did not reach the depth necessary for continued vulnerable exchange.

Did the number of relationships change for people on the design and research team as a result of dialogue? Temporarily, yes. Did the number of *deep* relationships across differences change? No, for the majority of participants. Did a majority of the design and research team members experience a sustained shift in resource-based power? Ultimately, no. There were medium shifts as evidenced by some participants accepting the need to provide Spanish interpretation in PTA meetings. But that change turned out to be a one-time resource movement and not a continuous flow. A community member later shared that decision-making practices continue to favor the loudest voices and marginalize others despite concrete proposals for more equitable decision-making protocols. Though the community may have formed more relationships, they are not yet leading to effective RD.

**Victor Udoewa:** An example of a successful RD project is a 12-member community that used a mix of intentional communal living (a few members) and weekly community meals, sharing, and discussion (all members). Through our relationship building, we learned about passions for working with children and a burden for homelessness. We organically grew a shared desire for relational service in those areas. We designed community projects that we did alongside young boys at a home for orphans. We also designed relationship building time and space with the young boys. Through those relationships, knowledge of the boys' situation, countries, and families flowed to us, and our resources (time, bicycles, funds, etc.) flowed to them. Over time, the relationship transformed from one of a group of benefactors and orphans, to contributing members of our city. One boy, now a man, was able to attend university and find a professional job. Another started a business. Another became a physical trainer. There are many similar stories.

## Conclusion

Systems practitioners Winhall and Leadbeater (2020) mention four keys that unlock system innovation: power, purpose, resource flows, and relationships. However, an awareness and focus on relationships actually affects all the other keys. Instead of seeking system health by trying to change power, resource flows, or purpose, one can focus on system relationships. As relationships deepen and the number of deep, healthy relationships grow, resources will flow. Power then shifts due to changing resource accumulation and flows, and shifting relationships between those with more power and those with less power. Ultimately, new deep relationships along with resources and power can change the purpose of the system as well.

Whether or not community members engaged in RD make onto-epistemological shifts internally, depends on their initial onto-epistemic framework. Certain communities already embody relationality in their realities and worlds, and this is an extension of their daily worlding processes and rituals. Others may experience an internal shift that may occur at different paces for different members engaged in the RD experience. The dynamics of those shifts and the location on the shifting journey affects what each RD team can create as the relationality leads the team to attend to the various locations of each team member. That attending does not mean catering but can even involve challenging, listening, pausing, returning, space-giving, etc.

RD shifts systems by building relationships, creating resource flows, changing power, and altering the purpose of small (sub)systems. RD transforms traditional information gathering, ideation, and building components of design by utilizing relationship-building methods and the design-as-relationship-building model. True RD requires awareness of power dynamics that can undermine healthy relationships and caution when engaging as a professional designer. To evaluate RD's effectiveness, we ask whether more healthy, deep relationships were established, and whether they led to sustained shifts in

resource-based power. More work is needed to see if a purely relational practice like RD can heal large systems, such as the education system for an entire region. In future work, we will explore the infusion of relationality into the decision-making process in a design journey.

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In Dialogue

# Ubuntu:

## A Philosophy for Systems Transformation

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Megan Seneque, Aggie Kalungu-Banda, Martin Kalungu-Banda, Sharon Munyaka

Ubuntu.lab is an initiative born of both frustration and inspiration. When the MITx MOOC (massive open online course) u-lab<sup>1</sup> launched in 2015, it garnered 70,000 registrants in the first year. However, the Presencing Institute's Martin Kalungu-Banda could not help but note the striking absence of participants from Africa. As a Senior Faculty member of the Institute and practitioner of Theory U, the framework on which u-lab was developed, he found it distressing that this methodology, now widely accessible through the MOOC, remained somehow inaccessible to the African continent. This frustration led to the inspiration for Ubuntu.Lab, a Theory U-based collective learning journey to co-create Africa's future, and the Ubuntu.Lab Institute to support Ubuntu.Lab and related activities.<sup>2</sup>

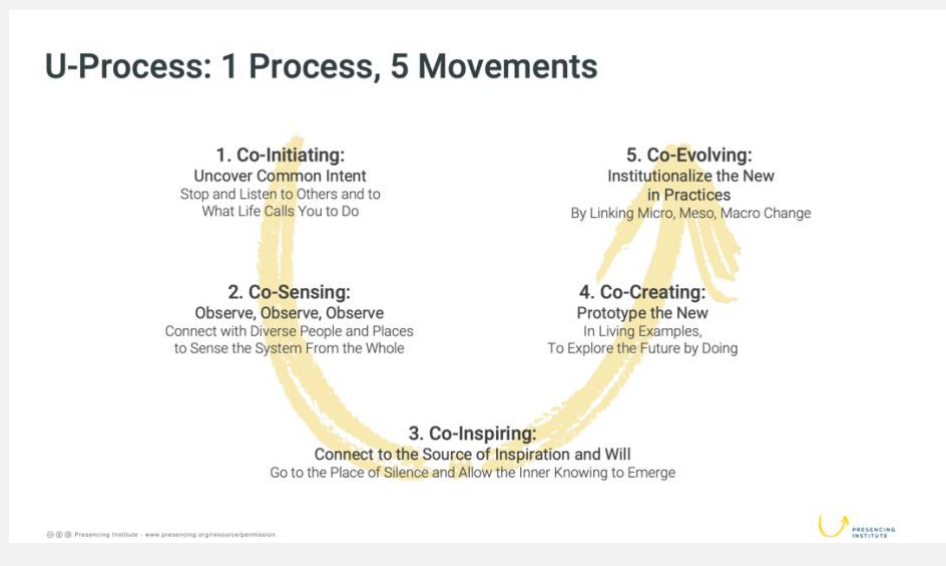
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<sup>1</sup> u-lab is a massive open online course (MOOC) hosted by MITx annually that guides participants through and online-to-offline Theory U learning journey <https://www.u-school.org/offerings/u-lab-1x-2023/pages/home>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about ubuntu.lab, see these two articles: 1) The rising of Ubuntu.lab: <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/part-one-the-rising-of-ubuntu-lab-e4abe33c3c34>  
2) An Ubuntu.lab Impact Story: <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/part-two-an-ubuntu-lab-impact-story-4894c0acac31>

Over time, the holding team has begun to adapt the offering to better reflect the African context, cultures and knowledge systems, allowing for the creative expression of the U process on the African continent. This critical and creative engagement with the methodology of Theory U through the philosophy of Ubuntu highlights an aspect of awareness-based systems change that feels especially relevant in a post-pandemic, and arguably more globally conscious, world. Ubuntu.lab (and the Ubuntu.Lab Institute) are living examples of a methodology that is contextualised and deeply embedded in place, thus avoiding an unwitting repetition of past colonial patterns.

Theory U is an awareness-based change framework emerging from over two decades of action research at MIT with organizations, institutions and communities around the world. The framework guides individuals and groups through a five-stage learning journey that integrates the multiple intelligences of head, heart and hand in service of sensing and actualizing an emerging future.<sup>3</sup>



In the following dialogue, founders Martin and Aggie Kalungu-Banda, along with facilitator Sharon Munyaka, join the Journal of Awareness-Based System Change's Associate Editor, Megan Seneque, to share their experiences and learning from launching and holding Ubuntu.Lab. Together they explore how different knowledge systems, including science, can be brought into conversation in an effort to democratize knowledge and support transformative societal change. They also delve into what it might mean, and what it looks like in practice, to have a distinct identity that lies within the context of local cultural

<sup>3</sup> For more information about Theory U see <https://www.u-school.org/theory-u>

and spiritual traditions and indigenous knowledges, while also actively participating in and contributing to a global community and movement.

The dialogue was prompted by an event held in March 2022, when the Ubuntu.Lab community came together to commemorate the life and contributions of Sister Letta, a professed nun, traditional healer, researcher and matriarch. Sister Letta embodied the paradoxes and potential of working across and with multiple knowledge systems, and her work and legacy are referenced throughout the dialogue.

## Participating in the Dialogue

### **Aggie Kalungu-Banda**

Aggie is the Co-Founder of Ubuntu.Lab and Managing Partner of Beyond Business School Consulting. She is also the Co-Founder of Impact Hub Lusaka and serves as an Associate of the Presencing Institute.

### **Martin Kalungu-Banda**

Martin Kalungu-Banda is Senior Faculty member of the Presencing Institute, a Visiting Fellow at the Said Business School of the University of Oxford, and a Senior Adviser to the Africa-Oxford (AfOx) Programme the University's Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship. He is also a Research Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

### **Sharon Munyaka**

Sharon is an Industrial and Organizational Psychologist registered by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and President (2022-2023) of the Society of Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa (SIOPSA). Currently, she is part of the Presencing Institute facilitation team delivering Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Leadership Labs to the United Nations.

### **Dialogue Facilitator: Megan Seneque**

Megan is an Associate of the Presencing Institute and Associate Editor of JASC. She is research associate with the Susanna Wesley Foundation at Roehampton University and Australian Catholic University. She integrates theory and practice in her work of systemic intervention.

## The Story of Ubuntu.Lab

**Megan Seneque:** Thank you for coming together today. This dialogue is very much about making visible a body of work that might not otherwise come into public view and which we feel is really important.

The impetus was that beautiful ceremony with Sister Letta and that tribute to her and her work of bringing Indigenous knowledge and practices together with western scientific knowledge systems. It's something about bringing the voice of

Africa in a very full way to show what the practice of Ubuntu actually means, and what it brings.

**Sharon Munyaka:** What I'm hearing is: what is the story of Ubuntu? What was the inception of the Lab? Why we even needed the lab—then, what work has been done and what are the intentions going forward? So if I think about it in three containers: how it started, how it's going, and where to go from here. These could be guiding pillars for the conversation.

**Megan Seneque:** That sounds perfect, and I would add a personal dimension.

What has drawn each of you and continues to draw you to the work? Each of you has a particular positionality. I know Aggie and Martin have a shared an intention, but they also have personal intentions, and I'd really like to hear what continues to draw you into the story of Ubuntu, the Ubuntu.Lab, and the Ubuntu Institute.

**Sharon Munyaka:** The way Martin and Aggie are sitting (side-by-side) reminds me of a picture of our parents in our homes where they're sitting for a portrait. I think in every home there's a picture of Mom and Dad, with their arms folded, and sitting there. I think the photographer said, “Okay, don't smile. Be serious, as the people in charge of this home.”

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** I think it was part of the culture of photography. You didn't smile

**Megan Seneque:** Okay, should we ask our parents, Sharon? [*Referring to Aggie and Martin sitting together side-by-side*]

**Sharon Munyaka:** Yes, our parents can start.

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** One thing that really excites me about this journey of Ubuntu.Lab is the Ubuntu philosophy itself. As African change makers, we share a common philosophy that we all grew up with. We know what it means, and it's not something that is strange to us.

### Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu is a philosophy and life-force that means “I am because you are” or “My wellbeing is intricately intertwined/inseparable with your wellbeing.” The terms “you are” and “your wellbeing” does not simply refer to “present humans.” It also refers to Our Ancestors (who are affected by our not dealing with one another well), to Future Generations (those who will call us their Ancestors, who when they are not well being of what we did will curse us); to Mother Nature (whose unwellness directly means our unwellness).

(M. Kalunga-Banda, personal communication, May 29, 2023)



Even when we were starting the program based on the global u-lab, we had a shared understand that people could identify with on the Continent. And I think it has really helped us also to connect just as human beings. Most of us have never met face-to-face. For instance, I've never met Sharon. We just meet online, but it's like we have met in person before.

When people travel, one thing that excites me is noticing people say, 'Oh, I'm around,' and brothers and sisters in that town just want to go and meet. I think it's well known that

for you to work together with people and bring about development, you need to get to know each other well enough, and I think this is an area where our Ubuntu.Lab community is doing quite well. I am looking forward to a day when we'll be able to meet face-to-face and share our dreams, again, and our reason why we came together: co-creating Africa's future.

I think I can end for now, and maybe Martin can pick up on the origins of Ubuntu.Lab.

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** Each time we tell this story we learn from our own experience, and isn't that part of what storytelling is all about? Yes, the listeners learn. But once the storyteller finds good listeners, the storyteller learns from the story they lived.

So, in a way, we are telling the story looking backward. We do not often tell the story forward. When we tell the story forward, that's the space of vision. When you can say, 'in five or 10 years' time I want to be doing this'. That's telling the story forward.

But when you tell the story backward, you have arrived. Somehow you tell the story with the hindsight of having walked the journey.

There are times when I tell the story this way: 'this is what we thought, this is what we planned'. But there are also times when I look back and begin to notice how things were changing. Not with logic, but in the moment—through a series of drifts. You drift into one part, piece, rhythm of what will eventually, when you look back, sound very logical. But which was not logical; it was a series of drifts. Maybe that is where the inner wisdom lies—noticing the logic in the experience of these drifts.

Why do I say this? Personally I didn't initially think of Ubuntu as a philosophy to work with. Originally, it was U-School Africa that I passionately wanted to help bring into being. We were on a U-journey through the global classroom.<sup>4</sup> That

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<sup>4</sup> The Presencing Global Classroom was a series of coordinated events which took place online from 2006-2012 for the purpose of teaching Theory U in a globally distributed manner. This served as a prototype for what developed into u.lab, starting in 2015.

was the focus. Along the u-lab journey, it dawned on me: we don't have Africans following this phenomenal global movement. Could we create a situation where we on the African continent can be part of this global movement? For years, when in meetings with colleagues at the Presencing Institute, I shared and repeated my intention to create U-School Africa. I wasn't talking about Ubuntu Lab Institute.

And I wanted us, the Africans, to use the methods and processes of Theory U to shift our own circumstances. Aggie, you might recall this differently. For me, the Ubuntu philosophy became more prominent, and I cannot remember exactly when we stumbled on it. I suspect it was during our trip across Africa. That's when, for us, the birthing to us of Ubuntu struck us: 'Oh, my God, we have a resource here.' And then we started re-learning and learning the philosophy of Ubuntu. I remember buying any book I could lay my hands on. I recall buying J.S. Mbiti's book on Ubuntu philosophy.

It was much later on, in a meeting with Ubuntu.Lab colleagues I proudly announced there was this Malawian philosopher who wrote this book (which I had read many years ago when I was studying anthropology in my twenties). To my embarrassment, one of our community members, Lillian Owiti, said, "With all due respect, Martin, J.S. Mbiti is not Malawian and he is not Zambian, either. He is Kenyan." [laughs]

Many years ago I studied anthropology, and J.S. Mbiti's book *African Religions and Philosophy* was like a Bible for anybody who wanted to understand Africans.

That's when I went there and dug up every book I could find. I read everything. I watched any videos I could find from Bishop Tutu who revisited the concept and practice of Ubuntu in modern times.

## Manifest Logic and Latent Logic

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** So what I'm trying to say is that there is an evolution taking place. When we look from this end it looks very logical, but we were stumbling upon new ways of thinking, new ways of doing things along the way. But I'm not taking away from the possibility or belief that there is an inner logic. When you catch a call, experience a calling, there is a deeper inner logic guiding you. There is an invisible hand guiding you, if you are open to it. I think that's what early colleagues, Aggie and I were open to.

Now, if I'm telling the story, I would say this with a little bit of hindsight: we want to co-create Africa's future, a future where poverty is a thing of the past, environmental degradation is a thing of the past, the enslavement of girls on the continent is a thing of the past, and education being accessed by only a few lucky people with financial resources is a thing of the past. That is what we mean when we say "co-creating Africa's future".

But that was not part of the manifest logic. I suspect it was part of the latent logic.

So how do we achieve this—co-creating Africa’s future? The primary and basic tool or technique—call it methodology—is what Aggie refers to: we are shifting the quality of our relationships. Literally that is the cradle from which we are constructing Africa's future, co-creating Africa's future.

Why do I so emphasize this? You, Megan, and the three of us—Sharon, Aggie and myself—have all lived in Cape Town. We know, for instance, how fellow Africans in South Africa would refer to everything north of the Limpopo as *going to Africa*.

Now we feel we are all Africans. Now we are feeling like one. In the first cohort of Ubuntu.Lab, we had colleagues in Namibia, we had colleagues in East Africa, colleagues in West Africa. “It is the first time that I'm sitting in one learning environment with people across many boundaries,” many participants acknowledged. For us, that was, believe it or not, revolutionary. The fact that someone in Ghana could sit in the same classroom as someone in Nairobi and another person in Lusaka. Even within the same country, this experience of profound connection was transformative: in Zambia I was in the same virtual classroom with Mr. Phiri of Mpika—a ‘remote’ place in Zambia. It was magical. Hence the celebration.

When Sharon went to Kampala it was a big moment of celebration. Seeing photos of Sharon and Consilous and others meeting in Uganda’s capital city, it is like she has arrived home. When I was in Johannesburg, Sharon was there. We said, ‘We’ve got to meet. You can't just end up doing your meetings from one hotel to the next.’ And when we meet, I’m meeting my sisters and brothers. It's heart felt, not just intellectual awareness.

It is through these relationships that we will co-create Africa's future. Creating the future we want begins with changing the quality of our relationships. We no longer see Namibia. We no longer see Lesotho. We no longer see Cairo as in Egypt. We just see Mongy [an Egyptian member of Ubuntu.Lab], a fellow African. And that's an amazing feeling and experience. Everything else is a footnote. Let me stop there.

## Embodying Ubuntu (or Grounding in the African Way)

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** I want to emphasize one point. The first cohort of Ubuntu.Lab, we mostly saw as the facilitators’ training.<sup>5</sup> I think the focus was so much on Theory U, as you said, because it was based on the u-lab. Even if Ubuntu was there, we were just using it as a word. But then we quickly realized that we really need to bring it in, and we had a session where we started looking

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<sup>5</sup> As we a way of providing quality education and reducing the cost of online learning (due to having to pay for data), Ubuntu.Lab decided to train local facilitators with the skills to hold transformative learning spaces. Nineteen facilitators participated in the training and then hosted 24 in-person learning hubs across eight countries.

at the whole five stages of Theory U, and said, ‘in an African way of life, what does it mean to co-initiate? What does it mean to co-sense?’

We looked at all the stages of the U and I think at that point—it was during coffee time, I think, we were in our conservatory—and we were also trying to think how best to start this session. For some reason, Sister Letta came into my mind. I called her immediately and I said to her, ‘Can you find a way for us to open the sessions in an African way?’ She said, ‘Leave it with me. I’ll get back to you.’ I think after two or three days she phoned me back, and she said, ‘I’m ready.’

We started the first session with the second cohort in an African way. As Martin mentioned, we dove deeper into what that that really meant. We brought it to listening: how do we listen in a new African way? We were really trying to bring it closer to home. That is, if this theory is really good and it's the framework that is guiding us, how can we ground it into our own ways of life on the continent as well?

**Sharon Munyaka:** Thank you. I think, just listening to the two of you, for me what comes up is the issue of embodiment. It is connecting with what Ubuntu means for different people. How does it show up across the continent.

I know that we are living Ubuntu. We are living it in how we interact with one another. We are living it in how we make decisions, how we show up for one another. Part of it is because Ubuntu already exists. The wisdom is already there—and we are just being activated again. We are giving Ubuntu a language and reference for anyone to understand what it is, what it feels like and what it looks like. To help me grasp it, I divided the word UBUNTU.

And for me the **U is about being united** across the African continent through our common love for Africa. When I look at the **B, it's about building an Africa** that we want. If we united in terms of poverty alleviation, if we're talking about gender-based violence and eradicating that, we are all building towards that; we are all building towards that common goal.

**The U for me is being unapologetic** about naming the pain points. You know, as Africans, we're holding up the mirror and seeing no one's coming. We are the plan for our challenges on the continent, and I think this is why we keep coming back, why I keep coming back, why I am responsive to the call for Ubuntu Lab initiatives. Aggie doesn't need to ask twice. Just once. It's a quick text, and that resonates across the whole Ubuntu Lab system in a way where there's nothing to think about. We're like, ‘Yes, we're ready. Let's go!’ We are the foot soldiers, we are doing this work. So, we are unapologetic about our love for the African Continent as we unpack what it means and what we can all do.

I think it's also around needing to work towards a common goal. We try and find that in terms of the prototypes that people embark on. People put their hands up and say, ‘hey, this is what I’m working on. Can you connect me to this person?’ On the Ubuntu Lab Alumni WhatsApp group chat, people share so generously

about different activities going on the African Continent. Someone is looking for a resource, they put it on the group, and that connection happens.

**The T in the Ubuntu is about being tied together** in our love for Africa. The metaphor that comes up is when we pull together branches, and we are tied like firewood into one strong bundle of wood. It's so strong that nothing can break it down. And if I think about the different people across the continent who've put their hands up from inception to now: 'I'm here, I can do this. I am here, I can do that.'

No one feels that a contribution is too small or that they are too important for this environment.' It's just something about our interaction, about how relationships are nurtured, where the space has been created for people to say, 'I have something to contribute from where I'm sitting. I think I have a voice. I think I have something that will help to create this Africa that we want.'

**And the U has been around unlearning.** And the unlearning has been tough, because we come in with all these files about how things should be or could be.

Then there's the new learning that's coming up; the reactivation of the knowledge from the land. I mean an example that I always share with people is about probiotics. And I remember this growing up. If your tummy is sore, eat the soil, because there your system is going to get sorted out. Anyone who grew up in a farming area would know this wisdom.

I know in our African culture, when you are very ill, you are encouraged to go home to the land of your birth. The belief is that the system remembers, the land of your birth remembers, your ancestors remember. The healing comes through the air you're breathing, through the soil. It is in being a part of that space that a re-connection is made and this is bigger than us. So here is an opportunity to understand the wisdom of the African continent and how we reactivate what we have forgotten.

COVID also opened the conversation around indigenous knowledge. We're saying, 'we don't know this phenomenon (COVID) that's come up.' The pandemic propelled us to learn, unlearn and relearn. As Ubuntu Lab, we held webinars during the height of the COVID pandemic and people shared their thoughts from across the continent. We shared on different approaches that people were using to manage symptoms, such as herbs that people were taking. It was a space to engage on the knowledge held across the continent.

The space that's been created within Ubuntu Lab has given us the freedom to dream, the freedom to say, 'oh, my goodness, what else is possible?'

Another paradox is our late Sister Letta who was a Catholic nun, a matriarch, a healer, a clinical psychologist, a teacher and a community leader. When I first met her, my brain had no file for a Catholic nun who is also a traditional healer. I was thankful for the time to know her and understand how she navigated different spaces and remained the vessel through which she interacted with these different domains.

Let me stop there for now, and allow Aggie and Martin to come in.

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** I like what you have just said Sharon, about how people are always ready to jump in and do something. And when you see that everybody is doing this all entirely [voluntarily]—I mean we have never really been funded.

From the beginning, when we were supposed to have been funded, and then the funder pulled out, people just said, 'let's do this. Let's have the face-to-face meeting because this is how Africa gets left out.' So let's also show the world that—yes, you promise and then you pull out, but we are going to go ahead.

I think that has been the spirit of what has been making us move on in this journey of ours. And it's so heart-warming that we are ready to give our time without really waiting to be paid anything.

People have been there, as Sharon has, since 2018. They are just there, and more and more are coming on board. We know that we're living in a world that doesn't just allow you to lead a life where you are just doing the work you want to do; you need to earn money. Hopefully one day we will jointly come up with the resources that we need to be sure that we fulfill everything that we want to do on our continent.

## Learning and Unlearning For and From Africa

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** I must say it's absolute genius. I've never heard UBUNTU as an acronym said in the manner that Sharon said—it's fascinating. I'm hearing it for the first time, and it makes a lot of sense.

I could point my finger to any one of the letters and I would connect. For example, if I say *unapologetic*. You know our history as being that of people apologizing—all the time—for who we are, where we are coming from, who we want to be all the time. And instead, UBUNTU declares an unapologetic approach towards life.

I'm not even saying that we have gone past being apologetic because those are deep and engrained issues which connect to the last U in Ubuntu. To truly be unapologetic we have to unlearn what we have been made to believe over hundreds of years. Being apologetic about who we are is in our DNA. Because of the length of time—over four hundred years—of slavery and colonialism, being apologetic has managed to seep into our DNA. Someone says, if you practice something over generations—say for a 1,000 years—people are born thinking, seeing, feeling that way. So, to be second-class citizens in the world seems to be right.

The first thing that ever dawned on me when I went to study in England was, 'Oh, my God! I found a white person begging, and just for the sake of it I had to give them something.' Because in my brain they cannot beg. Begging belongs to us, black Africans. That's the reality you see. They can't be beggars. It's almost

like it's not right that they should be begging. On the other hand, it's "normal" for us to beg, to be poor. That's why I like the idea of unlearning—unlearning our story as slaves.

We are not denying that we were enslaved and we continue to be enslaved in many ways, but we are not going to live with that, as if that's how nature was ordained to be. We need to unlearn that. We need to unlearn what colonialism wanted to do and continues to do. We need to unlearn what rigged economic systems tell us are the correct ways of organizing our lives. Unfair economic systems—we need to unlearn those. We need to relearn the freedom to question. And the freedom to create alternatives.

For example, take the World Bank and the UN. Do they serve our interest to the core? Can we sit down and chat about these things and see whether they are serving the future we want to create? What I am finding is different from the time when I was younger in university and more militant is that now I can engage in these conversations without being militant. Yes, I will be on a very strong path. But I can sit down and say, *let's talk about this and what else is possible*. If you refuse to talk, I need to find within myself what else will make you engage with me.

Because of the opportunity to learn to unpack anger for some time, you begin to notice that issues of justice and freedom are not based on race. They are based on hunger and education. Hunger for the well-being of all, and therefore you begin to notice that it is possible to be an African in spite of your skin colour. And that's why, when you sit with Hannah in Port Elizabeth and Anna in Namibia [White members of Ubuntu.Lab], they are as African as could be. They are as hungry for the redemption of the continent as anybody can be. It changes the game. Again, it flips back to the quality of relationships. Then you understand that it's possible to say we are creating an organization that is for Africans who want to co-create Africa's future.

So it's unlearning a lot of things. We have just begun scratching the surface and feel we are on the right path. However, we are at less than 1% towards the 100% we want to be.

Megan, you have been part of this journey in many respects. What are you thinking?

**Megan Seneque:** It was so interesting for me working and teaching in Rome last week. I was introduced to a group of women. There were 36 women from across the globe: Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, the UK, Indonesia, Australia. Someone said: "Megan is originally South African." She finished her introduction and I said, "I am fully African. There's nothing 'originally South African' about me. I wouldn't actually even know what that term means. And it completely broke the ice. I sat at breakfast that day with a Kenyan woman. She's living in Rome now. We were sisters. We'd met each other the night before and we made eye contact, and we knew that we were deeply connected. That's how it was, and she was my beacon in some way through the two days I was with them.

And Martin knows for me that integral ecology—the work of understanding that we are deeply interconnected with one another and with everything in the natural world—is an informing framework for my research and practice. As Bayo Akomolafe would say, “we are being acted upon all the time, but we think we're in charge.” So when you talk about driftology, Martin, and you talk about telling a story in hindsight, the whole of last week working on integral ecology with an Order of Nuns in Rome, this was a constantly unfolding process.

### **Integral Ecology:**

The context for using the term was set out in the 2015 encyclical letter from the Pope: *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. As with the Ubuntu philosophy, it is based in a recognition that we are deeply interconnected and deeply interdependent—with one another and with Mother Nature. The paradigmatic framework of *Laudato Si'* recognises that the ruptures and crises that we face—ecological, spiritual, social, cultural, economic, political—are interdependent, and call for an integration of different forms of knowledge and wisdom. An integral approach means that all the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, indigenous wisdom and knowledge systems need to be brought into dialogue, as together we convene or prepare the future. A future that responds to the "Cry of the Earth" and the "Cry of the Poor" (*Laudato Si'*)

(M. Seneque, personal communication, May 29, 2023)

The convener of the concepts of ‘postactivism’, ‘transraciality’ and ‘ontofugitivity’, Dr. Bayo Akomolafe is a widely celebrated international speaker, teacher, public intellectual, essayist and author of two books, *These Wilds Beyond our Fences: Letters to My Daughter on Humanity’s Search for Home* (North Atlantic Books) and *We Will Tell our Own Story: The Lions of Africa Speak*.<sup>6</sup>

We took one step and then another one followed, and then we met another person. and then we were introduced to another person. And so everything that you're saying speaks to me about the call of this time and the unique contribution, and why I say for me it's the concept, the practice, and the spirit of Ubuntu.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/about>



In this project, we work with a co-design team of five women, one of whom is a French woman, who has a retreat centre in St Lucia, north of Durban in South Africa. And how did she introduce herself? With Ubuntu, and how Ubuntu has drawn her into this work. So there is for me profound learning from Africa for Africa, for the rest of the world, and we've caught glimpses of it. I mean, that's what we have from the deep insights from your work in the Ubuntu lab and in the Institute, and from other work happening globally around Ubuntu, for example with John Volmink<sup>7</sup> people who are really working to theorise Ubuntu, not as a concept that is out of context, but as a deep practice. So for me, my absolute desire is for this learning—what you're learning and the insights that are emerging in your own context and from your journey—that we continue to surface those, to hold those, to connect them, so that web that you are making visible can become visible for the rest of the world.

There are seeds of the future that you talk about, that are constantly present. And in our history also. As Bayo Akomolafe says, the past is yet to come. These are the seeds of the past. That's the unlearning and unapologetic nature of things that you talk about. Those seeds for Ubuntu to become a genuine philosophy for mutual coexistence in every sense of what that requires.

*I'm of the Yoruba people of West Nigeria and some parts of West Africa. We don't think of time as an arrow of God flowing from a fixed past through the elusive present, and to an always fugitive future. That notion of time being a straight line is missing from our cosmology. Time is slushy. It's not even cyclical. It's slushy—it falls in on itself. It's rhizomatic. And in this sense, the past is yet to come (to quote Karen Barad); the past is not yet done; the future has already happened. This notion of time is melty and trickly. Sugary and sticky. It is what allows us to face ancestry as a serious matter in civilizational endings. It's the invitation for us to sit with the past—with the crack of time—and do other kinds of work there.*

—Bayo Akomolafe, re-posted from Facebook (August 14, 2022)

That's what I would most wish to bring to life, and I see that you're living it. Everything that you describe is an embodiment, as you say, Sharon. There's no other word for it.

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<sup>7</sup> Professor John Volmink is a leading figure and academic in Higher Education in South Africa. He has been instrumental in the Ubuntu Global Network.  
<https://www.ubuntuglobalnetwork.com/our-mission-2/>

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** I like what you said, Megan, that it is a gift. I think in one of the sessions a long time ago we had said that this would be a gift to the world—that this is the way the world needs to live. And looking at what Sharon has shared with us about what UBUNTU stands for. I also feel that people who have not experienced Ubuntu, and have not lived it, also have some unlearning to do.

They need to unlearn how Africa is perceived. Maybe they can unlearn and feel—what is it that is coming from this as a philosophy of the way people need to live? They're interconnected, as you said, with nature, with ourselves, and so what is it that they can learn? They have learned in a different way, through classrooms, but they can unlearn.

Something that I see as a big gift is that we're already interacting with the Presencing Institute with our friends globally; we are already starting to share. They can also pass it on in their communities and, of course, we do know that other communities as well have similar wisdom as Ubuntu. We can collaborate and see how we can make the world a better place.

**Sharon Munyaka:** I think there's also an opportunity through the work of Ubuntu. If I think about how the beating of drums opens up portals of connection, how chanting brings people together. What is possible in terms of accessing other parts of our intelligence, not just, you know, at a head level but the different senses? When we met in Lusaka, Zambia in 2018, we were challenged to think beyond the five senses. There are many, many more senses that we have as humans, how even just in terms of sound, the aesthetics, what it all does. Or if we think about dreams, right? So, the learning is also around opening up the wisdom that's already there, because how do we tap into that? It's almost creating for me the safety, which keeps coming up as a theme, so the safety to think beyond “this is acceptable”, or “this is right.” Ubuntu and the work of Ubuntu.Lab is revolutionary in that way that we can sit on a zoom call from across the continent, find points of resonance, but also be open enough to say, “oh, but we do this differently, or we understand this phenomenon in this way”.

I think the opportunity is around developing new language, developing new practices, expanding the knowledge that we have, and making it African, so that more and more people can relate to it and plug in because the embedding is happening over time. People are more familiar with the methodology of Theory U, more open to experiment, so the seeds have been sown, and the future is here—even if unevenly distributed. But it's here, and we need to just plug at it and keep it going. So, yeah, lots of scope for Ubuntu on the Continent. The change is here.

**Megan Seneque:** You know, Sharon, as you talk. I'm thinking of the first research summer school<sup>8</sup> that the Presencing Institute hosted. One participant was a Māori woman from New Zealand and we built a relationship and connection very quickly early on. At some point she came to me, and she said, "You know, Megan, there's no acknowledgement in this process that actually the wisdom that is contained in the U-journey is wisdom that we embody and embed all the time. It is our Indigenous wisdom." There's something there that you've said: Africa is expanding the knowledge and the practices too so that the methodology itself doesn't, once again, become a source of colonization unwittingly, and people think they've got to do it correctly. There's no doing it correctly, you know. If you look at the first *In Dialogue* in the very first issue of the journal (Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change), where Senior Faculty of the Presencing Institute were in conversation together about the origins of the U practices, Otto Scharmer says that it is not a case of bringing Theory U into the world: "You don't need to bring the U anywhere. It's already there. It's just not attended to. And all we do is provide methods and tools to it and follow the path which moves you one way or another, into a U-type of process... It's about paying attention to what's already there, at least in a dormant capacity" (Arts et al., 2021, p. 130).

And the bringing it to life on the African continent is different from the bringing it to life in other contexts.

And so I'm working at the moment with Australian Catholic University, and we are developing a core curriculum for all students around integral ecology and what it means. It's experiential, so we're looking at water. We're looking at food, fire and agriculture. We're looking at technology and time. We're looking at different dimensions through different knowledge systems. But one of the young historians I'm working with said, "You know, Megan, when I think about all the Aboriginal wisdom and Indigenous knowledge that we have in on the continent of Australia. What do we teach our first-year students? We teach them Ubuntu. It's wrong. Not that we can't learn from Africa, but we have incredible indigenous wisdom". So we take something from Africa and then we colonize the concept, and we teach it. I mean to your point, Aggie, the learning and unlearning needed when you've just colonized the concept that is not even yours to own. You don't have an experience of it and you teach it as a concept and those are the patterns for me as an educator. And in the context of transforming higher education, that's what I'm paying attention to.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2019, the Presencing Institute hosted the inaugural Social Field Research summer school bringing together academics, research-practitioners, artists and students working to advance the field of social field research and awareness-based systems change. <https://www.u-school.org/news/recap-of-the-social-field-research-summer-school>

## Embedded Locally, Witnessed Globally

**Megan Seneque:** What are the things that you are still holding in relation to this dialogue that you would like to express?

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** The bit that sits with me as a question mark is how we belong to the global community of the u-school for transformation—where we received the inspiration to do and to be what we are seeking to do—and at the same time listen to what the African soil is asking us to contribute towards.

**The u-school for Transformation** is the Presencing Institute's platform for making the tools and methods for societal transformation developed by the institute globally accessible, and for connecting individual changemakers, organisations and eco-system activation movements in regions around using Theory U methodologies to address societal challenges.<sup>9</sup>

This is not an easy path to walk, because sometimes it feels like we are separating ourselves from the whole. Far from it. That's not what we are seeking to do, but we also need to be cognizant of the fact that we have to be distinct enough to find ourselves. How we play these two—belonging to the larger whole while being distinct enough to find ourselves—is easier said than done. Hopefully as we engage in dialogue with the rest of our community in the Presencing Institute, this is appreciated, or we learn ways of showing up as being both—being members and part of the global movement, but also being a movement on the African continent, because there are peculiarities to our situation. As I said earlier on, the peculiarities emanate from history. There are characteristics that are unique to us. We are not just like all the other continents where things were allowed to evolve as humans increased in numbers and travelled across seas—but no, there are characteristics that are unique to us. The scars and the still open wounds of colonialism, of slavery; those cannot be just subsumed into the global. If we are to heal the traumas of these things that happened, we may have to look into ourselves and probably caucus amongst ourselves to find healing.

Yes, all our brothers and sisters across the globe—who understand the fractures that came through these unfortunate human events—would be like in a village when sometimes you are not the unwell person, but you feel you have a responsibility to support the unwell person or persons. What did we see in my village?

The well persons were either drum beaters or singers/dancers, so that the unwell person who is in the centre of the circle knows they have all come to support

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.u-school.org/u-school>

their journey to wellbeing. So, I recognize my responsibility and my duty, and I stand there to see, to dance, to beat the drum, to ululate, so that the unwell person might open themselves up to the spirits who will do the healing in the person. That's why the person sat in the middle. That's why the person danced from the middle, but the people who are well created a circle of faith. The circle is also a ring of hope and positive energy to facilitate healing. I expect the global community to do that for U.School Africa or Ubuntu.Lab Institute.

So that's one of the things that I, as a person, am grappling with.

The other one is just what Aggie began to talk about with regard to resources. To activate a movement like this requires a lot of resources, but the process of searching for resources can re-entrench dependency and colonialism and all these things we are talking about, because resources, in the first place, sit in certain places. But maybe we need to be creative enough and find other forms of resources amongst ourselves, and we have tried before. We have tried to host cohorts where people contribute whatever they feel like. We wanted to set up a new economy: an economy where people can contribute in different ways because it takes so much to run a cohort. People understood our call when we said, "If you have financial resources, kindly put in, but don't fail to turn up for the program because you didn't have the money. Even if you don't have a penny, you have something else you can give to the community." So, we encourage people to show up and pay in their community with their skills, with their knowledge, with their time. Payment does not have to go into the coffers called Ubuntu Lab, it can go into the community. You might be someone who knows plumbing, and can offer your skills at the nearby school. Maybe you are a good listener. Go and counsel the children at the nearby community center.

We are still playing with these concepts. How can we create an economy that is not bound by the modern-day interpretation of money? These are all in the exploratory phase and it requires courage and fortitude to further explore them.

## Democratizing Knowledge and the Secrecy of Wisdom

**Martin Kalungu-Banda:** My final comment is probably—what do we define as education?

What do we define as wellbeing? What do we define as science? Those are very deep questions for me, for which I do not have answers. All I know is that we need to not just reinvent education, but also reinvent our thinking about what constitutes education; reinvent wellbeing and the thinking about wellbeing.

But being here in Zambia with Aggie, who has not been well for some time now, shows me—as Sharon said—that walking the home soil is a journey towards healing. The local people we are meeting here know something about this and that as part of what it takes to regain well-being. The yearning I have is how do we bring science to all that wisdom and knowledge people have, and science in the sense of, can we know the underlying interplay between things. So, if I eat

soil from an anthill to deal with my bloated tummy, what is actually happening? What is contained in that type of soil, why does my tummy respond like that?

That's what I mean by science. And can anybody else who comes to know that replicate it? Admittedly some of our juicy pieces of wisdom are shrouded in secrecy. Knowledge and wisdom were shrouded under the banner of secrecy, and sometimes they deliberately created the smoke—so that the unsuspecting persons concentrated on the smoke, while the real thing—the fire—remained only known to certain individuals because it was a form of trade.

How do we come to know what is behind the claim to knowledge or skill? Revealing what is “behind” and making available to everyone is what, for me, democratizing knowledge and wisdom looks like. We are not saying everything was brilliant about our history, our traditions, and our culture. We also had ways that needed improving.

That's why the scientific method surfaces the underlying reasons and the conditions under which certain things happen, so that we can play the game at any time those conditions are in place. Science in this way is needed on the African continent to make more explicit our knowledge and traditions and wisdom.

**Sharon Munyaka:** A big thanks for the opportunity to be in dialogue. I think there's lots that needs to be unpacked. My mind was just kind of thinking about the secrecy of wisdom: what is that about? If knowledge is currency and we bring in the aspect of witchcraft and our own belief systems as well, how do we rethink how information is shared? If we're saying there's democratization of knowledge and we're opening spaces to say, but this helps, don't hide this information, what becomes possible. How do we reorganize ourselves to enable that sharing of knowledge? If we think about oral tradition, how do we document? Because you would know little children who are staying in the village would know, ‘oh this tree does this.’ A child who lives in the city will not know that, an adult living in the city would not know that. But we are getting clues from what is around us, so really lots of scope for more information to surface around how we can really bring this knowledge to the rest of the world. So thank you, Megan.

**Aggie Kalungu-Banda:** Yeah. Thank you. Megan, for making the time to start the dialogue. I think for me, I'm going away with the question of ‘How do we deal with the issue of Christianity and our and cultures and traditions?’ I'm saying this because even when we began having the welcome, the way when we asked Sister Letta to do that, you won't believe how many messages I got from people saying they would leave if this is what we are going to be doing in the sessions. The majority of us are Christians as well. So how do we embrace our own traditions and culture? Because I think once we get that right, we can be much stronger. Right now I think others hold a little bit back and feel, maybe, there is something we are trying to do here, which is very unchristian. So, I would love to pursue the question of Christianity and Ubuntu.

**Megan Seneque:** That really resonates with me as well, Aggie. It's holding the polarities there and understanding that we have a lot to learn from those polarities—what you were saying earlier, Sharon. I think you use the word contradictions. Like Sister Letta. Trying to remember your language, Sharon, but the matriarch, the religious sister, a scholar herself, the traditional healer. These are not irreconcilable things. In fact, these things are what need to be brought together in an integral ecology, Aggie.

And it's not to try and merge them with one another. So to Martin's point about, how do we make something that is distinct and our own, and unique that can also speak to a global community without diminishing itself, without being apologetic, you know, without feeling in some way not quite up to that.

So I think we've picked some very profound questions that if we were to address them—together—we would come to profound understandings.ext

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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*,<sup>1</sup> we understand that mental processes have become an important source of power in 21<sup>st</sup>-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

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<sup>1</sup> 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,”<sup>2</sup> 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).

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<sup>2</sup> 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 logframe<sup>3</sup>, 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

<sup>3</sup> 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 direction<sup>4</sup> (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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

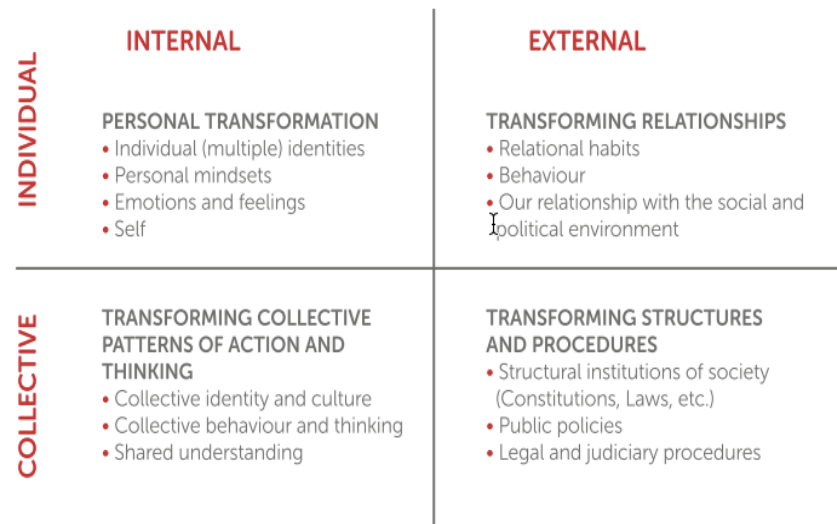


Figure 2. The four dimensions of change. (Source: Van Es et al., 2015).

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)<sup>5</sup>, 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,<sup>6</sup> 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*<sup>7</sup> (Pascale et al., 2000; Grashow et al., 2009) by offering a more

<sup>5</sup> 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)

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

<sup>7</sup>Adaptive 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

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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 dismembering and re-membering in a repetitive way has the shape of the infinity:

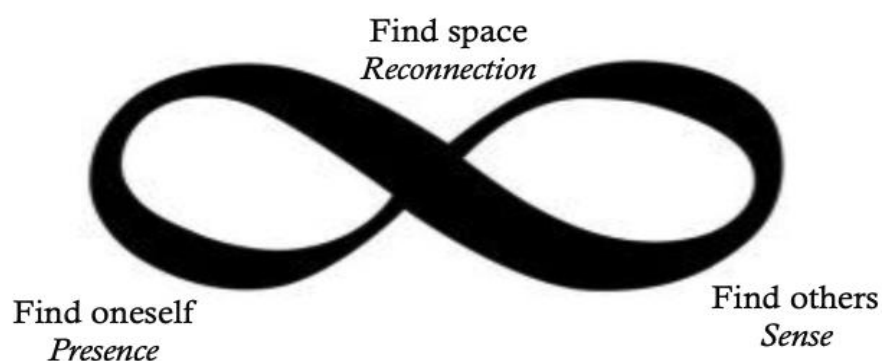


Figure 4. Psychopolitical foresensing for social and cultural transformation.

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 Transformation<sup>8</sup> 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.

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<sup>8</sup>See: <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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## Discussant Commentary

# Expanded Perspectives on Social Transformation in Brazil:

**A commentary on Cimini and Homem, “Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation (PFST): Theoretical Reflections for Action Research in Brazil towards the SDGs”**

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### Abstract

This commentary presents a broader perspective on the paper Psychopolitical foresensing for social transformation (PFST): theoretical reflections for action research in Brazil towards the SDGs. It is generally accepted that the current path of capitalism is accelerating the planetary climate crisis and social inequality and is bringing an individual and collective feeling of frustration. Cimini and Homem's brings in their paper a proposal in tackle this frustration feeling through advancing the theory of change (ToC) concept by creating a framework for an action research project based on awareness-based systems change (ABSC). I highlight three relevant contexts to Brazil to be considered in their action research project: i. Decolonization and good living: concepts in Brazil's current transformation mindset; ii. Nature-based solutions: the value of socio-biocultural diversity in Brazil; and iii. Practical experience on building a participatory ToC for the Amazon. Cimini and Homem's proposed journey on

PFST aiming to expand on ToCs approach by adding ABSC methodologies using presence-sense-reconnection, seems to be a path to integrate inner and out change with social and cultural transformation. They have a great opportunity, combined with a challenge, to plant a seed in leaders and changemakers in expanding their views of how impact can be generated. They can be bold in the PFST journey by enhancing awareness and actions, going beyond the SDGs, and bringing light to Brazil's position as a global leader in nature-based solutions to face climate change.

## Keywords

theory of change; decolonization; good living; nature based solutions

## Introduction

The purpose of this commentary is to bring a broader perspective on the paper Psychopolitical Foresensing for Social Transformation (PFST): Theoretical Reflections for Action Research in Brazil Towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I come from a background of more than a decade as a professor at the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, where I coordinate the Sustainable Actions Laboratory. The Laboratory focuses on practical actions in dialogue, mainly for sustainability, education, and social innovation, and in the past few years I have worked on consultancy projects creating space for dialogue, collaboration, and development for multi-stakeholder forums in Brazil and abroad by combining research and practice in dialogic processes to access collective intelligence. My initial degree in Biology with a Master's and Doctorate in Ecology give me the perspective of the importance of going from 'me' to 'we' and the reconnection with nature in building change of a sustainable future. I see the connection between individual and collective wellbeing for bringing social and cultural transformation at scale that provides the grounding for Cimini's and Homem's (2023) paper to be an interesting approach.

Cimini and Homem begin their paper by positioning the role of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the international urgency of this topic. However, historically, Brazil has based its economy on the exploitation and destruction of nature, dating from the beginning of the country's colonization (Dean & Ferro, 1996). Other world nations also based their development on this same principle, which has led humanity to the current critical situation in relation to its sustainability, with socially and environmentally unsustainable practices destroying nature and increasing poverty (Pachauri et al., 2014). It is widely accepted amongst those working in sustainable development that the current path of capitalism is accelerating the planetary climate crisis and social inequality, is leading society to destruction, and is bringing an individual and collective feeling of frustration.

Cimini and Homem dare to ask: “What if we guide this discontentment to become active engagement with social transformation?” (2023, p. 151). This powerful question guides their narrative on PFST. I would like to highlight that the systemic failures and general feeling of frustration that the authors bring in proposing a theory of change to foresensing the connection between individual and collective wellbeing, can be seen as a parallel with the ideas of the two-loop model, a nonlinear theory of change that guides transformation in complex organizations, also known as the Berkana model (Wheatley and Frieze, 2006). It is inspired in the growth and decline cycle of living systems and in the recognition that the change in complex contexts activates a life cycle (germination, innovation, maturation, and rejuvenation) and a death cycle (stagnation, disintegration, and decomposition) in order to impel transformation. The key point here, which is often missed in the transformative change literature, is that generating alternative futures needs to first connect with the existing assumptions that drive mental models of change.

It is exciting and heartwarming to read Cimini and Homem’s view that the debate on theory of change and sustainable development goals can be advanced by creating a framework for an action research project based on awareness-based systems theories. What I would like to contribute to their construction is the point that any action research model is put into practice in a particular place, and that the unique context must be taken into consideration. Therefore I want to highlight some contexts relevant to Brazil, as they chose this country to run their project. I will present the topics exploring these contexts individually in the sessions below: i. Decolonization and good living: concepts in Brazil’s current transformation mindset; ii. Nature-based solutions: the value of socio-biocultural diversity in Brazil; and iii. Practical experience on building a participatory ToC for the Amazon.

## **Decolonization and Good Living: Concepts in the Latin American and Brazilian Current Transformation Mindset**

I believe that decolonization<sup>1</sup> and Good Living<sup>2</sup> invite us to rethink the dominant notions of poverty and wealth, giving us the opportunity to envision alternatives

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<sup>1</sup> Decolonization has different meanings for different people, I see it as the decentering of epistemic, political and cultural ways of thinking and ways of existing in the historically colonized world, in order to disentangle the ideas and power rooted in colonialism. This conceptualization has been shaped by contributions from the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous peoples for the deconstruction of ingrained concepts (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Good Living is an intercultural construction of processes based on the ancestral communion between humans and non-humans, which denotes the foundations of a full life, based on a more harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, as part of a all integrated and interdependent. Latin American Good Living is composed of a trinity with the following approaches: Identity - Indigenous and pachamamist; Equity - socialist and statesman; and Sustainability - ecologist and post-developmental. (Acosta, 2016; Quijano, 2013).

that were present, but invisible to our notions of transformation (Lander, 2010; Acosta, 2016).

Decolonization has emerged as a powerful movement across Latin America, igniting a renewed sense of cultural identity and fostering a reevaluation of historical narratives. In the case of Brazil, a country deeply shaped by colonial legacies, the pursuit of decolonization has gained significant momentum, especially reclaiming Indigenous heritage and challenging Eurocentric paradigms (Quijano, 2013; Gandarilla Salgado et al., 2021). Despite the polarized political scenario of the past few years, where the environmental and the Indigenous causes were heavily attacked, the agenda seems to be regaining its strength.

It is a challenge to transform the individual and collective notion of a colonized Eurocentric view into a recognition of the rich and diverse Indigenous heritage that has long been marginalized in Brazil, an understanding of the importance of Indigenous cultures, languages and an effort to actively work to repair the historical injustices inflicted upon these communities. The revitalization of Indigenous languages, preserving traditional knowledge, and acknowledging ancestral territories have started to gain space (Grecco & Schuster, 2020).

Decolonization requires a critical examination of the dominant Eurocentric narratives that have shaped Latin American societies for centuries. This includes deconstructing power structures and reassessing the influence of the Western on local cultures (Escobar, 2005). By challenging these paradigms, we start to embrace diverse worldviews, promoting multiculturalism, and fostering a more inclusive understanding of our own history. In Brazil, for instance, scholars, artists, and activists have been actively engaging in decolonial discourse, highlighting the contributions of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous cultures to the nation's identity (Andreotti et al., 2019).

Aligned with that view, the Indigenous concepts of Living in Harmony with Nature and Community, *Sumak Kawsay*, originating from the Quechua culture in Peru, and *Suma Qamaña*, derived from the Aymara culture in Bolivia, encapsulate the interconnectedness of human beings, nature, and the cosmos (Acosta, 2016; Walsh, 2010). These concepts emphasize living in harmony, valuing community, and nurturing a balanced relationship with the environment, encouraging individuals and communities to prioritize values such as reciprocity, respect for nature, and collective well-being over material accumulation. They are often translated as "Buen Vivir", "Bem Viver" or "Good Living" (Lander, 2010).

Operating within the Good Living perspective, communities strive for ecological sustainability, acknowledging that the health of the environment directly impacts human prosperity. This holistic approach to well-being embraces the preservation of ancestral knowledge, cultural diversity, and the recognition of the inherent rights of nature. A valuable insight obtained from this perspective is to challenge the dominant paradigm of unlimited economic growth that is leading



to a deep civilization crisis and to encourage societies to adopt more sustainable practices that respect the environment and foster social cohesion (Lander, 2010).

In the context of climate change and environmental degradation, these concepts inspire alternative ways of relating to nature, prioritizing its preservation and regeneration. Moreover, they promote a collective consciousness that transcends individualistic pursuits, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility for the well-being of all beings.

Considering these concepts that derive from and are specific to the Brazilian and Latin American context can contribute to the PFST journey, which aims to enhance awareness and action towards SDGs, by shedding light on local and regional issues that tend to be overlooked when dealing with global agendas (such as the SDGs). Moreover, it will bring value to the socio-biodiversity that is central in Brazil and in the interconnection between humans and nature in pursuing collective happiness.

## **Nature-based Solutions: The Value of Socio-biocultural Diversity in Brazil**

Nature-based solutions (NBS) is often used as an umbrella concept; it involves working with nature to address societal challenges, providing protection, restoration and management of natural environments (Seddon et al. 2021). NBS can be as simple as protecting an area that provides ecosystem services or, on the other hand, as complex as making an extensive intervention in an ecosystem. Some examples of NBS include restoration of native vegetation, and expansion of integrated agriculture systems and recovery of pasture areas. NBS have a key role in changing Brazil's scenario and as the authors point out the solution is connected with public and private sectors engagement. These approaches can contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation, water management, food security and biodiversity conservation, which helps them achieve the related SDGs (Martín et al. 2020). Nature is essential in all SDGs, and NBS can contribute to achieve them.

I believe that NBS can make Brazil a green power. Our natural capital must be at the center of our economic strategy. Building public policies, economic and ecological development strategies, we can become the most important country in delivering NBS. Political engagement is crucial for the successful implementation and scaling up of NBS. Governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders must work together to create enabling environments for NBS, including policy frameworks, financial mechanisms, and capacity-building efforts (Bustamante, 2022; CGEE, 2022; IUCN, 2020; Miles, et al., 2021).

I understand that a transition from a country of commodities' producing, where the destruction of nature was the driver of economic development, to a country that will focus its efforts on NBS, requires an important change in the collective mindset. This is a huge task that needs combined efforts from private

and public sectors. One example that will require a deep transformation are food systems which will be healthier and more resilient if NBS are embedded.

This brings a new perspective, in which the conservation and restoration of nature can generate the economic value and social development necessary to generate a cycle of social and economic prosperity with the protection of nature (S. Diaz et al., 2019).

This change in mindset is not only personal, but also collective. Companies that historically were not concerned with protecting nature, in recent years have invested in nature solutions based to mitigate their impacts. The recent turn towards NBS connects with Cimini's and Homem's PFST proposal, providing an approach to achieving transformative action it calls for grounding in the current context of Brazil.

## Practical Experience on Building a Participatory ToC for the Amazon

The authors present their understanding of the applicability of theories of change (ToC)<sup>3</sup>. They acknowledge the fact that not all approaches that call themselves ToC are the same and that it is being used as an adaptive frame to design change (Vogel, 2012).

I would like to complement their theoretical consideration of the use and adaptation of ToC to promote transformation with a practical example, by sharing an experience of building a participatory ToC for the Amazon Forest as a consultant (Oláb, 2023, A Collective Theory of Change for the Amazon). The ToC was a request from a multi-stakeholder collective initiative that aims to develop and identify innovative and tangible solutions for the sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity, forests, and natural resources in the Brazilian Amazon. The initiative seeks to leverage investments with a positive socio-environmental impact in the Brazilian Amazon, to share good practices and foster innovative partnerships that integrate all sectors of society, scaling up private sector investment in NBS and environmental start-ups in the Amazon basin (PPA, 2023).

The need to build a ToC for the initiative was related to the process of developing the identity and the recognition of the added value that the initiative brings to all parties interested in the conservation of socio-biodiversity in the Amazon. We sought to create a shared vision with partners, in addition to pathways to reach impact, and to consider the strategies, lines of action and results built collectively. Engagement was a central point in building the ToC and the process involved 26 interviews as well as two workshops with around 30 participants for the stakeholders of the initiative.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Theory of Change' is an explanatory framework that outlines how activities are understood to contribute to a series of results to achieve intended impacts. They can be developed and represented in different ways, being an adaptive frame.

In the construction process of the ToC, it was important to consider the socioeconomic context of the Amazon, where there is a need for new development models that improve the well-being of communities, preserving their ways of life and the forest on which they depend, taking advantage of opportunities to carry out undertakings that 'keep the forest standing' in protected areas of sustainable use and indigenous lands (ISA, 2020).

The model chosen for the initiative's ToC was a modified version of the scheme presented by UNICEF in its *Methodological Briefs: Impact and Evaluation 2 - Theory of Change* (Rogers, 2014). We adapted the model to embed it to the context. The original ToC had *implementation strategies* as a starting point, leading to *outputs*, that lead to *outcomes* reaching *impacts*. In the adaptation, we started with *context and motivations*, leading to *strategies* that connected to *Action lines*, that lead to *outcomes* and connected to *impacts* towards a *vision*. From the beginning of the construction of the ToC, we knew that we would need to acknowledge the huge task that is conducting Amazon's economy along a sustainable path. Therefore, ending with *vision* instead of *impacts* felt more connected to the reality that were addressing. The understanding of the context through the interview process with the partners was essential for the choice, as it was imperative to embrace the complexity and the uncertainty in the beginning of the process, and be open to let emerge what the field required, which is one characteristic of a social field approach to effecting systems change (Koenig et al., 2022; Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023). This allowed the model to reflect the needs of the context and also consider the contributions of the interviewed partners.

The initiative's ToC considered the breadth of the Amazon and its socio-biodiversity in its resulting vision: 'Amazon(s) with quality of life, rich biodiversity, and sustainable use of its natural resources'. There are no easy solutions to such huge and urgent challenges, hence the need to structure collaboration spaces wherein collective intelligence, the fruit of dialogue and co-creation can serve as the basis for lasting paths, both for the Amazon and for other biomes of the Brazil and the world.

In this example, a ToC built collectively served to catalyze key stakeholders around a common agenda, creating focus, inspiration, and a critical mass to drive the much-needed transformation forward. The ToC has given the initiative a renewed sense of purpose, built upon their shared vision for positive transformation in the Amazon, where businesses, civil society and local government all have a role to play.

In the past years, I have seen other ToCs successfully used as guidance for social and environmental transformations in the Brazilian scenario. I see value in their use as described above with a participatory approach, probing, and accessing the context. As pointed to by Cimini's and Homem, there is a need to "develop skills for grasping context information, real-time learning and long-term commitment with iterative, flexible and adaptive programming" (2023, p. 154). I agree and corroborate with their view that "Best-practices based on pre-

established understandings, blueprints or linear sequencing of fixed work plans are not helpful for social transformation”. Their proposed journey on PFST aiming to expand on ToCs approach by adding ABSC methodologies using *presence-sense-reconnection*, seems to be a path to integrate inner and outer change with social and cultural transformation. They have a great opportunity, combined with a challenge, to plant a seed in leaders and changemakers in expanding their views of how impact can be generated.

## Closing Remarks

My suggestion to Cimini and Homem is to take into consideration the expanded perspectives needed to foster transformation in Brazil while conducting their experiment. Brazil has its own context considering its history, socio-biocultural diversities, extensive territory with natural unique environments and its great biodiversity, hence any transformative change effort needs to work with, be grounded in, support that context. They can be bold in the PFST journey by enhancing awareness and actions, going beyond the SDGs, and bringing light to Brazil's position as a global leader in nature-based solutions to face climate change.

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