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Supporting Institutional Transformations: Experimenting with Reflexive and Embodied Cross-Boundary Research

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Introduction

In 2015, the Welsh Parliament introduced a ground-breaking new legislation to support an ambitious national political commitment to the principle of Sustainable Development: the ‘Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act’ (WBFGA, 2015). At the core of the Act are seven ‘wellbeing goals’ and five ‘ways of working’. While the former are centred around achieving a ‘healthier’, ‘prosperous’, ‘cohesive’ and ‘more

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equal' Wales, the latter enshrine 'collaboration', 'integration', 'prevention', 'long-term', and 'involvement' at the heart of all public-sector work. The wellbeing goals and the ways of working have since been embedded in the Environment (Wales) Act from 2016, and 'translated' into an overarching principle of sustainable management of the natural resources (SMNR) of Wales. In accordance with this legislation, natural resources must be used in a way and at a rate that "maintain and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide" for present and future generations (National Assembly for Wales, 2016, p. 2). Although neither legislation explicitly talks about 'transformation', the implication is that to achieve compliance, all affected stakeholders need to engage in a deep and profound re-thinking of the ways we work to achieve human and ecological well-being.

Shortly after the introduction of the above legislation, a co-funded doctoral research project on collaborative forms of natural resource management was co-developed by a small transdisciplinary team of academics and (cross-divisional) civil servants within Welsh Government (WG). The aim was to enable an extended investigation of collaborative ways of working in a range of different SMNR settings (including both government-led and community-led initiatives). While a participatory action research (PAR) approach was always part of the original project design, it was only after the appointment of the doctoral researcher that PAR principles became as important in guiding the internal process of transdisciplinary working between the co-ordinating team, as they were in guiding the study of external SMNR initiatives. This chapter recounts the experience of the doctoral researcher (Giambartolomei, lead author) appointed to this project.

Specifically, we discuss Giambartolomei's experience of transdisciplinary collaboration through the methodological lens provided by blending the Formative Accompanying Research (Freeth, 2019) and the Embodied Researcher approach (Horlings et al., 2020). In addition, we also look at the role of creative methods and Theory U (Scharmer, 2018) in further promoting collaborative processes of meaning-making in transdisciplinary research settings; in particular, their role in enabling emotional and embodied ways of working to be forefronted. In doing so, this chapter contributes towards shedding more light on the dynamics

as well as the challenges—personal, professional, and emotional—of adopting a collaborative way of working in the pursuit of institutional transformations towards sustainability.

Guided throughout by an understanding of policy actors “not just as rule-setting and rule-following beings, but relational agents who work out the substance of policy through interpersonal relationships and everyday transactions” (Lejano, 2020, p. 2), we offer a critical reflection on Giambartolomei’s first-hand experience of co-experimenting alongside policy actors with alternative ways of working in the *spaces in between* the written publication and implementation of SMNR legislation and policy. We focus in particular on three of Giambartolomei’s own formative moments in this shared journey. The narration of these three moments is based on evidence drawn from the multiple, intersecting pathways of experience and reflection that we encountered during her study. Although primarily recounted from her perspective, they encompass both ‘inwards’ (i.e., self-examining personal assumptions and mindsets) and ‘outwards’ (i.e., collectively examining structural and institutional barriers) dimensions of individual and collective group learning.

The chapter illustrates the role of emotional labour, vulnerability and energy in such co-experimental work and emphasizes the need for the practicing of *care* in building relationships of trust and collaboration, especially within the context of sustainability transformations (Moriggi et al., 2020). Despite being ever-present, such affective properties are rarely acknowledged as legitimate and relevant within governmental settings. Experimenting in the *spaces in between* written legislation and the relationships and practices occurring among actors tasked with implementing such legislation, we assert, provides a fertile ground for shaping and co-creating new and shared understandings. Furthermore, co-creative practices centred on embodiment and the experience of relationality, of *being and doing* with one another, are especially effective here; they bring to life the (dry and hollow) principles and provisions of legislation. At the same time, however, the critical challenges imposed by a neoliberal governmental approach that leaves very little time and space for people, especially civil servants, to be part of such experimental, co-creative spaces, must not be overlooked.

We conclude by emphasizing the importance of dedicating sufficient time and resources to enable a culture of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013) such that embodied and collaborative ways of working can be more fully supported and understood within governmental institutions. It is only by normalizing such ways of working outside transdisciplinary research projects, or during occasional, alternative moments of experimentation, that they can truly become far more integral to, and accepted within, everyday practice. It is, we argue, through such a process of care, through a collaborative and continuous process of aligning our heads, hearts, hands and feet, that we will be able to progress along the pathway of socially and ecologically just sustainability transformations, regardless of (and because of) our personal, professional or institutional starting points.

The Importance of Cultural Transformation for Wider Sustainability Transformations

Scholars in sustainability sciences emphasize the need for sustainability ‘transformations’ to ensure the survival of the human species, threatened by global systemic collapse triggered by anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss (among many other factors) (e.g., Blythe et al., 2018; Feola, 2015; O’Brien, 2012; Pelling, 2010; Pelling et al., 2015). The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (IPBES) defines transformation as a “fundamental, system-wide change that includes consideration of technological, economic and social factors, including in terms of paradigms, goals or values” (IPBES, 2019, p. 7). Similarly, O’Brien (2012) defines transformations “as physical and/or qualitative changes in form, structure or meaning-making. It can also be understood as a psycho-social process involving the unleashing of human potential to commit, care, and effect change for a better life” (O’Brien, 2012, p. 670). Importantly, the type of transformations discussed by these authors are those labelled as ‘deliberative and intentional’, meaning that they are the results of chosen response

paths—“in anticipation of collapse” (Pelling et al., 2015, p. 114)—rather than the unexpected or unintended outcomes of a process or event (O’Brien, 2012, p. 670).

There is wide agreement among social sustainability scientists that the transformative change we need is not *just* about technical solutions for which we merely need more scientific knowledge and evidence—the ‘technical trap’ (Nightingale et al., 2020). Instead, adopting a transformation-focused analytical lens means directly questioning and challenging the values, paradigms, norms, beliefs and assumptions that underpin and constantly exacerbate anthropogenic climate change, environmental destruction and socio-economic inequalities worldwide (Fazey et al., 2018; O’Brien, 2012). The concept of transformation requires that we address the root or structural causes of something considered a threat (e.g., climate change). This includes, for instance, investigating the existing social, cultural and economic relationships as well as power hierarchies that have or will trigger systems’ failures (Pelling et al., 2015).

Fazey et al., (2018, p. 199) are explicit in their belief that “intentional transformative change is possible and that humanity is not entirely a slave to its past or current circumstances and trends”. The concept of transformation as proposed by O’Brien and others (Fazey et al., 2018; O’Brien, 2012, 2013, 2018; O’Brien & Sygna, 2013; Pelling et al., 2015) draw attention to the necessary “shifts in the balance of power, rights and responsibilities in institutions, discourse and behaviour” (Pelling et al., 2015, p. 115) to overtly challenge the *status quo*, including those who largely and disproportionately benefit from current structures and systems of power (and oppression). Nevertheless, there is great uncertainty inside and outside academia around *what* exactly should change, and according to *whose* views and definitions of transformation (Feola, 2015; Nightingale et al., 2020; O’Brien, 2012). In fact, deliberative transformations hold at their core democratic participation and multiple forms of deliberation to define future (sustainability) pathways that have, so far, often failed to gain traction (Nightingale et al., 2020).

Among the biggest challenges to nurturing the conditions for deliberative transformations is the ‘technical trap’ mentioned above: in underplaying the critical role of “power and politics” in such processes, we

also risk a great underestimation of the role of agency and the potential of people to move forward or hinder systemic change (O'Brien, 2018, p. 155). To overcome this 'trap' and the simplistic view of change attached to it, O'Brien and Sygna (2013) propose a heuristic device to understand transformations as a 'whole', made of three integrated and interconnected domains or spheres: the practical, the political and the personal (see Fig. 16.1).

The *practical* sphere includes technological innovations, infrastructures, and all those "specific actions, interventions, and strategies that directly contribute to a desired outcome" (O'Brien, 2018, pp. 155–156). The *political* sphere represents the systems and the structures (i.e., norms, rules, regulations, institutions, regimes, and incentives) that influence how systems are designed and governed (*Ibid.*). Finally, the

Fig. 16.1 The Three Spheres of Transformation (Source O'Brien and Sygna (2013))

personal sphere includes the beliefs, paradigms, assumptions, worldviews and values that individuals hold. These also represent the very factors that influence how systems and structures (i.e., the *political* sphere) are defined and ultimately changed (*Ibid.*).

The *personal sphere*, as visible in Fig. 16.1, is the overarching sphere that holds the other two dimensions together. It represents both individual and collectively-shared assumptions and understandings about the world, which shape how reality is perceived and socially constructed. This entails that it also “defines what is individually and collectively imaginable, desirable, viable and achievable” (O’Brien, 2018, p. 156). As O’Brien stresses, it would be “tempting to equate culture with the personal sphere” (*Ibid.*), when in fact, as she argues, culture is pervasive and transversal, cutting across all three spheres. Moreover, it is embedded and perceivable, especially in the interactions among these three domains.

The concept of culture is extremely wide and holds a myriad of (contested) meanings and understandings. Depending on the angles and contexts from which examine culture, “culture can mean anything from networks of meaning, to a way of life, to high culture and arts” (Soini & Dessein, 2016, p. 2) Without going into too many details of the scholarly discourse debating the meanings of and approaches to culture in the sustainability sciences, in this chapter, we draw on (Geoghegan et al., 2019) who investigate the issue of culture and climate changes from three perspectives. First, in terms of ‘knowing’ (cultural practices in past and contemporary scientific and epistemic communities); second as ‘being’ (embodied and lived experiences, emotional encounters and everyday practices); third, as ‘doing’ (concrete experiences of ‘cultural work that pave the way for alternative social-ecological futures) (Geoghegan et al., 2019, p. 2). This three-pronged approach to the exploration of culture in climate change and sustainability transformations discourses confirms what has already been mentioned above: to culture is a *verb*, an ongoing, constantly evolving relational process that crosses and shapes the spheres of transformations, at both the individual and the collective level. But most of all, culture is about agency, and therefore a (much needed) cultural shift is about mobilizing collective imagination and agency, to envision, embody and realize alternative socio-ecological frames and

futures, beyond the capitalist and neoliberal paradigm, beyond dyadic visions of the world and life (humans vs nature; body vs mind; individual vs collectivity; reason vs emotion; etc.) (Dieleman, 2017).

Based on the above reading, cultural transformations towards sustainability are, therefore, about re-imagining, re-envisioning things differently—us as a species, our relationships and whole systems. Hammond (2020, p. 3), conceives cultural transformations as “processes of individual and collective meaning-making as a way of broadening the society’s imaginative space”. Understood also as “necessarily dynamic, fluid, and heterogeneous” (Hammond, 2020, p. 8), cultural transformation is essentially a process in which we, individuals and societies, make and re-make culture through the co-creation of new *shared meanings*: “Climate facts arise from impersonal observation, whereas meanings emerge from embedded experience, and the environmental social sciences, arts and humanities are well-positioned to foster a more complex understanding of humanity’s climate predicament” (Geoghegan et al., 2019, p. 3). As Geoghegan et al. (2019) suggest, there is an increasing recognition from across disciplines of the key role the social sciences, arts and humanities can play in helping policy-makers and communities to engage with fundamental ‘cultural discussions’ around the meanings, values and worldviews attached to terms such as sustainability, climate change, social and ecological well-being. Accordingly, the next section presents a methodological approach adopted by the first author as a way of engaging in such ‘cultural discussions’, through embodied, relational and caring practices.

Embodied and Accompanying Research

The methodological approach presented here is a creative blend of different theoretical concepts and a more spontaneous set of practices, at the core of which lie two distinct frameworks: the Formative Accompanying Research (Freeth, 2019) and the Embodied Researcher approach (Horlings et al., 2020). In this section, we summarize the key components of each framework, introducing also how a multifaceted theory of

care reconciles these two approaches and underpins the whole research practice analyzed here.

Formative Accompanying Research (FAR) Framework

The Formative Accompanying Research (FAR) framework (Freeth, 2019), in essence, “is committed to promoting knowledge about collaboration while promoting the practice of collaboration” (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 58). At the core of the FAR approach lies a dynamic conception of the positionality of a (FAR) researcher: they can benefit from the *proximity* to their team or group, that allows them ‘to experience the inner workings’ involved in doing collaborative work, but also from the opportunity to ‘move further away’, to maintain an overview of the wider mechanisms of collaboration.

To navigate the blurring boundaries between the different roles that FAR researchers assume while working collaboratively in team or group settings, Freeth (2019) therefore distinguishes between three roles—*scientific researcher*, *team member* and *intervener*—and three related research orientations. The goal of the scientific researcher is ***learning about*** (the interdisciplinary team) and creating transferable knowledge; the team member ***learns with*** the team, alongside the team. Finally, the intervener ***learns for*** the team to support the advancement in terms of research outcomes. Although the context to which we apply this framework is different from that in which it originated (see Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020), it nevertheless helps us explain and analyze “the idea of research positionality [as] *constituted in movement*, between outsider and insider roles” (Freeth, 2019, p. 54) in the context of cross-boundary collaborative research.

In understanding a researcher’s positionality as a fluid, complex, and dynamic process, Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) further identify three *balancing acts* and three related *practices*, to negotiate the paradoxes implicit to each balancing act. These balancing acts are needed to navigate the tensions that necessarily arise when moving between being an insider and outsider of the team. They argue that these acts are “a continuum, and that all positions along this continuum are possible and

appropriate at different time” (2020, p. 62), with none of these positions existing independently, but only in relation to the others along the continuum. The first of such acts is balancing **participation** and **observation**, a well-documented tension described by a plethora of literature on ethnographic and participatory methodologies (e.g., Billo & Hiemstra, 2013; Cahill, 2007; Newton et al., 2012). Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) propose a first accompanying practice of “**dynamic proximity**” to balance this tension and the paradox of being both an insider and participant, as well as an outsider and observer, along the same continuum. Keeping a dynamic proximity allows the researcher to be close enough to see finer details, but also to be able to step back, to hold a system view and see the ‘whole-in-context’ (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 62). By doing so, a dynamic proximity enables the researcher to provide the team (or group) with specific inputs for reflection and discussion. Finally, adopting dynamic proximity allows the researcher to be near enough “to perceive when the conditions are ripe for team-level learning”, and distant enough “to avoid imposing a learning agenda” (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 63).

A FAR approach therefore helps the researcher to see the ‘inner workings’ and emotional labour of those involved in collaborative and interdisciplinary teams. Curiosity and care, the second balancing act introduced by Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020), shed further light on the emotional labour involved when digging deeper into certain (personal) matters of a group, towards which the researcher might be led by their curiosity. In fact, “curiosity and knowledge regarding the needs of an ‘other’ – human or not” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 98) are required for adequate care, which becomes “a doing necessary for significant relating” (*Ibid*). Recognizing the interdependence of all beings allows one to embrace the idea that “caring is not a romantic endeavour, nor an exclusive affair of motherly love, but a matter of earthly survival” (Rose, 1983). When curiosity, a basic characteristic of any researcher, meets care as a form of responsibility for the becoming of the object of the research (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011), this creates the ground for a “careful curiosity (...) attuned to possible impacts of the research on others” (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 63). On this ground, the researcher, through a second accompanying practice of ‘critical reflexivity’, stays in

inquiry mode, but at the same time is able to recognize appropriate times and conditions (or lack thereof) to dig deeper, and to challenge the others on uncomfortable territory. By being critically reflexive, the researcher therefore *accompanies* the group and its individual members (i.e., “walks in step with those being researched” (*Ibid.*)), while also taking responsibility for their own situatedness (normative positions and power exerted) within the research, all the while aware of the possible impacts on others.

Acknowledging that the interests and normative positions that a researcher holds do carry power within the research context, leads Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) to the third balancing act with which researchers have to engage: the balancing between **impartiality** and **investment**. Given emphasis here is the fact that impartiality does not equal neutrality (i.e., no one is ever ‘interests-free’) but rather implies “being aware of interests but seeking to remain unbiased” (*Ibid.*, p. 64). As the above discussion of the concept of care suggests, once we recognize the interdependence and fundamental relationality of all beings and things within the Earth system, *caring* becomes a doing, a practice necessary for survival, which implies caring for (i.e., maintaining) that web of relationships, and dealing with the vested interests and powers with which this web is imbued. As an “inevitable consequence of being in relationship” (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020, p. 59), we are partial and invested, especially when decisions taken within a group also necessarily impact on our role and work. A practice of “**embedded relationality**” allows us to balance, on the one hand, the need to overtly challenge certain interests by “claiming the power granted by an insider–outsider perspective” with, on the other, leaving the matter to the interpretation of the rest of the group. This often implies engaging in an exercise of enriching perspectives without having to necessarily achieve a compromise. Freeth and Vilsmaier remind us here of Haraway’s understanding of ‘embedded relationality’: it produces “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connection called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (Haraway, 1991, p. 191 cited in Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020, p.64)).

Freeth and Vilsmaier (2020) finally propose three ‘anchoring principles’ for navigating the dynamic and fluid positionality at the core

of the FAR approach: congruence, sensitivity and translucence (p. 64). However, the practices, the balancing acts and the whole experience that we present and discuss here have been mainly anchored to one overarching principle: care. As mentioned above, a (feminist) ethic of care stems from acknowledging the interdependent and relational nature of all things—first and foremost, of human and more-than-human lives. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) puts it, such interdependency is “the ontological state in which humans and countless other beings unavoidably live” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 4). More specifically to the context under study here, if we are to recognize the key role of relationships, relationality and interdependence in the context of *doing collaborative and transdisciplinary work*, then it is also worth remembering Fisher and Tronto’s definition of care: “*a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40 original emphasis; also cited in Tronto, 1993, p. 103, 2013, p. 19).

Both Tronto and de la Bellacasa stress the intrinsic tensions and ambivalences attached to care as a three-dimensional concept made of maintenance work, affective engagement, and ethico-political involvement. Such an approach is far from an idealized, ‘innocent’ or essentialist conception of care as something necessarily and inherently ‘feminine’ or ‘good’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013). Instead, the doings and works of care aim to nurture an ongoing and hands-on process of re-imagining and re-creating ‘as well as possible’ relationships. It offers a way to ultimately re-claim care as a means to foster solidarities (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 11), amidst unavoidable tensions and conflicts, while experimenting with more just ways of being and doing, of ‘caring with’ (Tronto, 2013) together. It is this understanding of the principle of care and its importance for doing collaborative and transdisciplinary research that leads us in turn to the concept of the embodied researcher.

The Embodied Researcher

The Embodied Researcher provides further ‘grounding’ of the practices characterizing the FAR framework within a place-based approach to sustainability research. Horlings et al. (2020) argue that researchers involved in place-based research “suspend the categorization of different roles” (e.g., reflective scientist, process facilitator, knowledge broker, change agent and self-reflexive scientist (see Wittmayer & Shapke, 2014, p. 488), engaging instead in transformative and situated research practices as ‘*embodied researchers*’ (see Fig. 16.2). The embodied researcher is characterized by four elements: heart, hand, head and feet (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 479). This conceptualization portrays the researcher going into the field with their whole selves, adopting a reflexive approach inwards and outwards, also a key aspect of the FAR framework discussed above.

Fig. 16.2 The Embodied Researcher (Source Horlings et al. (2020))

Horlings et al. (2020) discuss how the embodied researcher practices self-reflexivity in the way they are aware of their own (evolving) positionality and normativity, and through their “responsibility and willingness to change” (*Ibid*). At the same time, importantly, they continuously consider and acknowledge the biases, values and positions held by the people involved in the research (beyond themselves); this ultimately informs a critical reflection on the research’s dynamics, processes and data. As is also the case with FAR, neutrality is not an option; rather, being reflexively aware of our own partiality strengthens Haraway’s idea that there is no contradiction between being objective and partial: “... a practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of knowledge and ways of seeing” (1988, pp. 584–585).

The embodied researcher’s practices envisioned by Horlings et al. (2020) stem from a rooted normative stance (a deep wish to support change towards sustainability) present in their *heart*, which in turn acts as an “inner compass” (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 479). Conscious of the values and principles they stand for throughout the whole research process, the embodied researcher engages as a human being in the place and with its people, intertwining new personal connections with the communities involved, and developing ethical responsibilities towards those people and their stories. Being grounded in the place through commitment and a sense of responsibility towards the people is represented by the *feet*, as shown in the above figure. The heart and the feet allow the researcher to experiment and engage with situations and people through their hands and actions, according to a care-centred and process-based (rather than an outcome-oriented) approach. Engaging in research as a full human being, invested and aware of responsibilities, normative positions, roles, emotions and inner workings necessarily brings with it a process of self-transformation:

“Self-transformation happens by engaging with critical theories related to sustainability and transformations (head), by reflecting upon one’s own normative position as a researcher (heart), by experimenting with methods grounded on one’s own values (hands) and by engaging in places

as a human being open to developing response-ability (feet).” (Horlings et al., 2020, p. 480)

Therefore, both the FAR and the embodied researcher frameworks share a vision of a self-reflexive, embedded, invested researcher that builds caring and creative practices, without ever compromising their analytical, critical, and enquiring attitude.

In the remainder of this chapter, the combination of the above two frameworks allows us to merge a descriptive and analytical set of characteristics of the embodied and transformative researcher, with a more dynamic (and open-ended/fluid) analysis of their practices. This supports a fuller account of what it takes—personally, emotionally and professionally—to be *care*-fully engaged in the pursuit of sustainability transformations in a transdisciplinary collaborative setting.

Co-creating Transdisciplinary Communities of Practice—A Journey

This section discusses three formative moments the doctoral researcher (lead author) experienced in the evolution of her transdisciplinary collaboration with the WG (and subsequently Natural Resource Wales (NRW, a pan-Wales ‘public sponsored body’)). These moments were selected since they were occasions when the implications and tensions of the embodied and accompanying research approach adopted by the first author emerged in all their complexity. In addition to critically reflecting on these three moments, we also further introduce the wider doctoral study context (2017–2021) in which they occurred. In doing so, we seek to produce an integrated account of how, in a transdisciplinary research setting, the personal and professional journey of a researcher can become interwoven with that of the non-academic partners in a mutual and relational dynamic process of co-evolution. Given the content of this section is founded upon the direct and first-hand experience of Giambartolomei, we therefore switch for this narrative account to the first person.

Woven throughout this narration are references to the multiple intersecting components and language of FAR, the Embodied Researcher and the overarching principle of care.

Embarking on a Transdisciplinary Journey

The initial stage of the collaboration (and of the PhD) was dedicated to *learning about* the context of Wales, its governance, policies and approaches to SMNR. It was also dedicated to getting to know the key individuals and organizations who work on the ground, including our partners at WG and NRW. Through my role of *scientific researcher* (Freeth & Vilsmaier, 2020) embedded in the collaborative project, I was able to dig into critical theoretical frameworks (e.g., political ecology, sustainability transformations) that could provide my partners with alternative or complementary approaches to those embraced in the Welsh legislation around SMNR.

Looking at SMNR through a distinctively political lens, critically reflective, for instance, of the structural socio-economic inequalities affecting access to and control over natural resources, enabled me to unpack and challenge taken-for-granted meanings, rooted in managerial and technocratic approaches to environmental governance. Given the need for pragmatism, such approaches often overlook the tensions and ambivalence of concept(s) such as ‘sustainable’ ‘management’ of ‘natural resources’ that can induce very different meanings, depending on *whose* assumptions and perspectives are privileged in the definitions. In accordance with the conceptual framework set out above, the *learning about*, therefore, went hand-in-hand with *learning with*. While providing my partners with new inputs from the literature and theoretical perspectives under study, I was gradually engaging my *head* and my *heart* in the research, *making sense* of such (new to me) theories, while also building my own understanding and normative position around the subject.

Four advisory meetings (i.e., namely the coordinating team of academic and WG collaborators) held during the first phase of the PhD (May 2017–April 2018), were focused on starting to explore together different assumptions, alternative ways of looking at the practical and

political implications of pursuing ‘collaboration’ for ‘SMNR’. Here, it is worth noting that these four advisory meetings were first conceptualized as meetings solely for guiding and advising the PhD researcher. However, they quickly transformed into a two-directional process, *learning about*, *learning for* and *learning with*. Within these meetings, I learned about the inner workings, achievements and challenges of implementing the SMNR principles. Together, we started to explore questions I raised that included, for example: *whose* definition of sustainability are we considering? *Who* is already sitting around these policy and collaborative tables? *Who* is missing from these conversations, but should be included? Is the currently followed managerial and a rather top-down approach only ticking the ‘collaboration’ box, or are we open and committed to truly transformative (inwards and outwards) practices and institutions that include in this conversation people who are not the ‘usual suspects’? In posing these questions, I was trying to navigate and balance my *curiosity* about WG collaborators’ own ideas and perspectives on these issues, which did not seem to be fully addressed by the current formulation of the policies and legislation, but all the while *maintaining a caring and ‘safe’ space* as much as possible. By doing so, I wanted to avoid anyone feeling (personally) attacked or criticized, but rather feel encouraged to reflect on current policies and practices from different points of view. In this initial phase, I therefore found myself engaging in the complex balancing act of *critical reflexivity*, through a practice of *care* that would allow me to nurture the space of safe collaboration we had started building (care as maintenance work) while also asking questions I profoundly care about (care as ethico-political involvement): e.g., where do we stand (as individuals, community members, citizens, policy-makers, academics etc.) in the journey of Wales as a nation committed to social and ecological wellbeing for present and future generations?

After this initial phase and purposefully relocating to Cardiff in Spring 2018, a new and much richer phase of collaboration with WG began. My constant and physical presence in Wales facilitated our interactions, allowing a shift from formal and pre-organized quarterly meetings, to more spontaneous and frequent encounters. Moreover, I started to build new networks with people from various sectors and organizations involved in SMNR practices across the whole of Wales and, in so doing,

also gradually enriched my knowledge of the people and the places at the core of my research. Concurrently, my sense of attachment and belonging to Wales was growing fast—parts of its landscape reminded me so much of my home village in Italy! The more I engaged with the people, the institutions and with its outstanding natural beauty, the more a sense of care (in an affective and emotional sense) and responsibility (as ethico-political involvement) was growing, defining my role as a researcher, and more simply as a human being, becoming fully committed to personally contribute—in whatever small way possible—to realizing human and ecological wellbeing in Wales. My *feet* were increasingly grounded and my *hands* more and more ready to take up an active role in advocating for a necessary ‘cultural transformation’ with and within governmental organizations. I felt fully present with myself and in my role as *embodied researcher*.

Formative Moment #1

In the first phase of my PhD, I was invited to a workshop organized as part of a joint programme put together by WG and NRW to further support the ongoing efforts to nurture a ‘cultural transformation’ within their organizations, towards a more collaborative and integrated way of working across departments and sectors (referred to hereafter as ‘the WG-NRW joint programme’). The workshop was aimed at a variety of officers and stakeholders from community, public and third sector organizations involved in SMNR delivery, with a total of approximately 50 attendees. This being the first event I was invited to by my WG partners, I found myself still *learning about* and, unable to navigate FAR’s spectrum of *dynamic proximity*. I felt mainly stuck in the (silent) observer’s place, without being able to *participate* and articulate critical considerations. The observed conversations emphasized the need to find the right communication strategy to ‘galvanize’ people to learn to do things differently, in line with the new ways of working. Most of the debate, it appeared, was therefore about finding the right strategy to communicate the ‘evidence’ (mainly conceived as ‘the facts’ produced independently by scientific academic institutions) to those without access to, or not

educated or interested enough to appreciate such evidence—“just avoid the high-level stuff” was one of the comments I recorded in my notes. The importance of blending and respecting different types of knowledge, experiences and perspectives was neglected in order to meet objectives of rapid and efficient delivery, through ‘galvanizing’ (uncompliant) people to do the right thing. I felt astonished by some conversations at the tables, and the frustration I experienced during this workshop required a lot of emotional labour on my part to contain potentially inappropriate reactions.

Personal and shared reflections with my WG and NRW collaborators after this workshop clearly suggested that more targeted work was urgently needed to bring officers and professionals working with SMNR initiatives into a space where they could collectively reflect on the meanings and implications of the new ways of working and NRP priorities in their everyday work. This would entail a far greater amount of time spent in conversation, listening deeply to one another—not always a common practice in these organizations, as reiterated by a number of individuals in both organizations on several occasions during my doctoral research. This opportunity to listen and interact with different people working in both organizations helped me to realize the direction in which I should focus my own contribution to the planning of future events of the WG-NRW joint programme.

Formative Moment #2

Subsequently, to reflect on the above workshop, WG and NRW collaborators organized a meeting where I was invited to provide my feedback and thoughts. When preparing for this meeting, I felt very strongly the need to convey messages about the “inside-out adaptation” (O’Brien, 2013) and the importance of challenging our own paradigms through the use of different media. I decided to *learn for* by gathering the most relevant theoretical and academic inputs for this discussion with WG and NRW in the form of a very rudimentary, imperfect, yet comprehensive illustration on flipchart paper (see Fig. 16.3). Creating this illustration, I felt deeply and fully embodied in my research while experimenting with

Fig. 16.3 Draft illustration of keywords (Source Constructed by author)

this unusual medium, imbued with a creative tension between ‘letting all go’ (on paper, with crayons, scissors and glue) and maintaining an extent of rigour and clarity of my messages (as usually expected of an academic and for interactions with governmental institutions).

This moment, which perhaps might sound like a minor, trivial detail, represented instead a turning point in my personal and professional journey, a step into my own process of self-transformation, as described by Horlings et al. (2020). Although at first I had never thought to show that illustration to my collaborators, I then in fact realized that I was the one proposing to *them* to *learn with* one another, embracing vulnerability and bringing our *whole selves* to our collaborative journey. Therefore, if we were hoping to acknowledge and challenge personal assumptions, paradigms and worldviews, I had to accept imperfection and perhaps also risk to appear ridiculous or a ‘mere student’ rather than a professional researcher. So, after this realization, I proudly went into the meeting with the drawing (Fig. 16.3). The reactions were generally

positive and stimulated, as hoped for, a fruitful discussion and mutual learning. This experience and the trust and reciprocal respect already in place with my WG collaborators gave me strength and confidence to follow my intuition and experiment further with my own creativity.¹

Formative Moment #3

Between the end of phase two and beginning of phase three of my PhD, WG and NRW collaborators invited me to a series of preparatory meetings aimed at planning and designing two new sets of pilot workshops, as part of the WG-NRW joint programme. It was especially my involvement with one of them that brought about my third formative moment in our collaborative journey. This workshop was co-designed with, and facilitated by, ‘Emergence’, an “evolving art, ceremonial and facilitation practice” with a “history in hosting transformative events and spaces for dialogue on issues of creativity and sustainability and change processes” (Emergence, 2020), and was led by Fern Smith and Phil Ralph.

The workshop focused on enhancing skills and capacity of practitioners across Wales to become *trusted intermediaries* and *change agents*, able to champion meaningful and transformative collaborative practices across sectors and organizations for the SMNR. To do so, we agreed on the need to learn about and practice deep-listening (to one another and to ourselves), and open and honest communication, from the shared basis of understanding and empathy. Using Theory-U (Scharmer, 2018) as a guiding framework for an embodied, practice-based learning (see also Pearson, this book), Phil and Fern proceeded to creatively guide participants in their ‘journey along the U’ to collectively develop the

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¹ In addition, I had also built some confidence in using more creative and alternative means to express my reasoning (and myself more in general), thanks to my simultaneous involvement in the Project Skyline (a third sector-led feasibility study to assess the potential for community land transfer in the South Wales Valleys), that also formed part of my doctoral fieldwork. Through Project Skyline, I had the opportunity of taking part in and co-facilitating the engagement processes led by various artists’ collectives in the involved communities. In those instances, I was able to experiment (alone, as well as collectively with other participants) with the power of art and artistic practices to bring ourselves out of our comfort zone and free up (mental) space for new thinking, new reflections and visions for action.

skills of ‘learning-by-doing’, through co-production, collaboration and prototyping new ideas.

At the core of this journey was the aim of discovering those *inner* and *structural* blind-spots of leadership, collaborative practices, and wider system change. To do so, space and time were created to purposefully look *inwards* and *outwards*, through a new pair of lenses (i.e., Theory U). From the outset, it was made clear by our facilitators that we would potentially be entering an uncomfortable space that would lead us to face vulnerability, uncertainty, fears and a sense of being lost amidst a process of *conscientization*, “*conscious raising*” (Freire, 1970) and empathetic self-awareness.

As Fig. 16.4 shows, ‘going through the U’ is an inner journey made of various steps and phases. Throughout the workshop, the way we experienced this was by switching between more individual reflections and collective sharing, either in groups of four to five people, or with the whole group of participants (around 20 each time). A key element of adopting Theory U was the focus on **embodiment**: the process of gradually unravelling the institutional (structural) barriers, as well as the inner ones, to fully embrace transformative change that requires an open will,

Fig. 16.4 The Theory U process of co-sensing and co-creating (Source Pearson et al. [2018] as adapted from Scharmer [2009])

an open heart and an open mind. Therefore, these three ‘requirements’ immediately put us, the participants, in a context where our professional hats were no longer relevant. Instead, we were asked to meet just as human beings. As some of the participants said in their feedback form, it was “powerful being just a person” although “getting rid of the expectations on my role” was considered challenging—sentiments with which I also fully concurred from my own experience.

In this process of *learning with* each other and taking time for *care*, we engaged our bodies, our hearts, and our hands in a dynamic relational process of sense-making: what does collaboration mean to us? What does ‘deep-listening’ mean? How do we do that? How can we learn to listen to ourselves and others, without interruption, leaving aside a judgemental attitude to embrace a welcoming and generative one? As one participant put it, “making sense of the mess in the way we did it” was perceived as highly valuable, but was also considered as challenging with the same participant reflecting: “[it was challenging] to make sense of the mess in my mind”. Many exercises proposed by our facilitators helped us to reflect on these contradictions. As highlighted by participant feedback, one of the most appreciated parts of the workshop was a walk outside with one other person, whom we had (ideally) not met before, to share a formative moment of our lives with, while also practicing deep-listening. These walks and the request ‘to have more of it’ were among the most frequent answers to the “what was good about the workshop” question, as well as to the “what would you do differently” question, in the feedback forms.

Especially through the one-to-one walk, immersed in nature, present with ourselves, we had the opportunity to encounter each other, to feel connected, to feel being *in relation* with one another, as human beings. “Taking time out connecting with others”, “sense of community you managed to create it!”, but also “talking with people without having preconceptions of their views”, “more connection and a different type of dialogue” and “meeting people and doing exciting, meaningful, and sustainable things” were among the participants’ answers when asked what was good about the workshop. Being aware of our inherently relational nature, of being and doing together, implies being reflexive about the nature and dynamic of interdependence. A core part of the journey

along the ‘U’ was in fact to fully embrace the truth that the one is not separate from the system. However, the more we recognized our interdependence, the more vulnerability, fear and (at times uncomfortable) intensity of emotions came along. For example, some of the participants reported the following as personally challenging: “Being vulnerable to others”, “looking inwards”, “being emotionally honest”, “being uncomfortable, yet feeling safe”. Observing and experiencing first-hand these dynamics through the lens of transdisciplinary research, helped me to further realize the complexity and arduousness of the emotional labour required for co-creative and collaborative working.

The workshop was organized twice, two weeks apart, with two different groups of participants, although I was the exception since I participated both times. This allowed me to experience the usually fluid and ambivalent role of the embodied and FAR-inspired researcher, always juggling between insider-outsider, participant-observer, impartial-invested roles, in a more distinctive way. During the first set of workshops, I fully embraced the role of *participant*, enthusiastically engaging with fellow participants in all the activities proposed by the facilitators. I thoroughly immersed myself, especially in the **self-reflexive process** core of the workshop. We crafted a space together in which we took the time to simultaneously reconnect, inwards and outwards, individually and collectively. The importance of time dedicated to nurturing reflexivity was mentioned by the majority of the participants in their feedback on what was good about the workshop: “loads of reflection—very much needed”, “Time to go deep—nothing felt too rushed—helps drop down into reflective space”, “time to re-centre”, “allowing time for reflection”, “space and time for people, to let themselves out of their boxes”.

At the same time, however, through the required emotional labour, moments of intense inner working drained much of my energy. I felt that my internal compass had become unbalanced: a propensity towards only one side of the spectrum envisioned by the FAR framework brought me towards *participation*, *investment* and *care*, leaving no space or energy to counterbalance that instinctive need to be *just* a participant. The inner working, reflection, sharing and *learning with* the other participants resulted in a sense of loss of my usually ambivalent researcher’s

role. I was painfully letting myself into my own personal journey along the U: I noted in my journal “so hard to let it go, I feel very embarrassed and vulnerable”. Nevertheless, I was aware that my normative positions and my strong will to contribute to that (cultural) change (at the *heart* and *feet* of my research practice) required me to fully embrace that vulnerability to be able to care, to co-create and to hold that space with others, that could let us all feel part of a wider community with common purpose. As one participant similarly experienced it: “interesting points on how to change—the need for pain and discomfort”.

One example of such complex and difficult moments of vulnerability came towards the end of the first set of workshops. The final steps of the Theory U, as depicted in Fig. 16.4, required us to *crystallize* a vision, an intention, an idea, that was generated throughout the *presencing* phase (the uncomfortable and painful ‘bottom of the U’, the place from which we also generate and create ‘the new’) into a concrete and tangible *prototype*. This involved us listing and identifying a series of concrete actions to bring ‘the new’ to life, and make it real. When we were asked to make our own prototypes by the facilitators, I refused. I felt I was not ready yet to get out of ‘the bottom of the U’. The painful but generative moment I was going through was not finished yet, I needed more time to process that pain and discomfort, before being able to ‘prototype’ my (new) intentions and vision. When we were asked to share our prototypes with the rest of the group, and I had to admit that I could not do it, it was embarrassing, but also liberating and empowering: through our shared experience and *learning with*, I had reached a sense of connection, safety and trust within that newly emerged ‘community’, that I felt confident and fine with being honest about my “failure”.

Discussion

Earlier in this chapter, we proposed that *cultural shifts* are fundamental to systemic change towards sustainability; we are envisioning such cultural shifts as re-thinking, co-creating, and re-imagining new and alternative meanings and understandings of the world we want to live in and the people we want to be. The interactions (and reactions) that characterized

some of the three formative moments reviewed in the preceding section show how artistic practices can facilitate such collaborative and creative processes of meaning-making. When looking at policy-making contexts as relational, Lejano (2020, p. 4) argues that “what is needed is closer, undivided attention to the workings, and the richness, of the relationships themselves” between the policy actors involved. Throughout this chapter, we have attempted to account for such richness and intensity by discussing the relational dynamics between participants, while making sense of principles, requirements and *ways of working*, established by the Welsh legislation in relation to SMNR.

The elements of *relationality* and *embodiment*, the *being* and *doing* together, have remained at the very centre of our account throughout. While we have elected to predominantly focus on the reflexive experience of the lead author, her experience, in turn, points to the wider relevance and potential of fore-fronting care when implementing policies and practices for sustainability transformations. Our experience therefore supports a conception of ‘knowledge’ and ‘knowing’ as multiple and distributed elements, which develop and evolve through people’s relationships and practices. The Embodied Researcher and FAR frameworks have allowed us to critically analyze relationality and embodiment for creative and collaborative (research) practices.

Two crucial elements/challenges have emerged. First, the engagement in such creative and collaborative sense-making processes is extremely **time-, energy- and emotionally-intense**. Moreover, it has the potential to produce multiple and multi-faceted tensions within (as well as between) participants. In the case of the first author’s own experience, such (emotional) intensity was exacerbated by the fact that she anchored her practice to the principle of care, which (as discussed above) is an ambiguous and multifaceted concept. In the instances in which she was not fully able to balance impartiality and investment, the intensity of her emotional involvement mixed with her ethico-political commitment to *practice* care, leaving her in an uncomfortable situation. As a result, she found it hard on such occasions to re-establish a ‘safe distance’, and a *dynamic proximity* between herself and the group of participants.

Second, the emotional work involved in such creative and collaborative processes goes hand-in-hand with the uncomfortable (but unavoidable) task of facing **vulnerability** and fears, triggered by *being* and *doing with* others. The experiences analyzed here stress the importance of meeting one another ‘just’ as human beings during shared, collaborative endeavours. From working with artists as professional facilitators we have learnt to experience vulnerability as a way of practicing and embracing interdependence and relationality. As highlighted by Tronto (2017, p. 32), we do go through a fundamental ontological shift, a fundamental rethinking of our very own nature, when we understand that “everything exists in relation to other things [...] people, other beings and the environment are interdependent”, and that “all humans are vulnerable and fragile”. At the same time, though, *knowing* that we (as the human species, and as Planet Earth inhabitants) are interdependent and vulnerable is not enough: the care involved in *being* and *doing together* dramatically helps us to fully embrace our very own condition.

Notably, however, the embodied and relational experiences and practices analyzed here require two fundamental elements: **time and mental space for care**. ‘Time-out for thinking’ was especially highlighted by many of the participants as the main good thing, for example, about the ‘To the Moon and Back’ workshop. A fundamental benefit of such a workshop for professionals from governmental organizations and other practitioners was indeed to carve out some time and space for themselves to engage in conversations, listening and reflecting alone and with others. Their everyday jobs, often filled with tight deadlines and narrowly-defined deliverables, rarely if ever allowed such engagement, and left little, if any, room for experimentation and possible failure. The professionals involved in the ‘To the Moon and Back’ workshops, once having overcome an initial reluctance to make time for them, found it ‘refreshing’ to have the opportunity to deeply engage with one another. Time and (mental) space to experience genuine collaboration and the sharing of stories about personal as well as professional lives, constitute the very base on which to build relationships of trust. Ultimately, these relationships underpin the whole legislative structure around SMNR in Wales.

An important question therefore arises from the discussion of our experience (Giambartolomei's especially) of collaborating with members of WG in a transdisciplinary research setting: how can we (academics) best support governmental organizations and the individuals within them, to institutionalize these alternative practices centred on embodied and relational experiences (e.g., deep listening, walking conversations, prototyping together), and mainstream them into the policy-making realm? How can governmental institutions enable such process-based practices to stimulate meaningful and creative collaboration, without exhausting or over-exploiting people's energy and motivation to get involved? We suggest that one place from which to start answering such questions is by asking these professionals directly, but also via more creative forms of inquiry: what support do *you* need in order to build stronger relationships and facilitate deeper collaboration throughout your—and our—ways of working? Space and time are certainly critical here, but given the potentially transformative nature of this question, undoubtedly numerous other forms of support will also continue to be required.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed and analyzed the first-hand experience of a doctoral researcher in doing collaborative and transdisciplinary research with governmental institutions in Wales. Our account is grounded in an innovative methodological lens that, centred around the principle of care, combines the Formative Accompanying Research framework (elaborated by Freeth, 2019), and the Embodied Researcher approach (introduced by Horlings et al., 2020). Set in the context of the *spaces in-between* SMNR legislation and its implementation, we have applied these combined frameworks to analyzing fragments of multiple, intersecting journeys. These journeys include: the joint programme of the WG and NRW to improve their collaborative organizational culture; the experience and reactions of participants encountering this joint programme, each committed in their own ways, to realizing SMNR's principle on the ground; and the embodied trajectory of the doctoral researcher herself,

attempting to *accompany* these professionals for a small part of their journeys, trying to listen as much as possible to their stories and needs, while also walking her own doctoral path. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that such *spaces in-between* offer rich potential to co-creatively experiment with the relational and embodied dimensions of deeper, more meaningful and meaning-making forms of collaborative working. It is through *care-full*, iterative and reflexive experimentation that we can begin to better align our heads, hearts, hands and feet. Ultimately, such alignment is fundamental to co-creating a shared journey of socially and ecologically just sustainability transformations.

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