ECOVILLAGES AS SPACES OF PLACE-BASED TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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Propositions

1. Ecovillages are places that offer 'glimpses' of a possible future world making important in sustainability research.
   (this thesis)

2. A shift from a modern consciousness to an ecological one is key in transformations towards a more sustainable world.
   (this thesis)

3. A focus on technological solutions in addressing climate change distracts from the deep transformative learning needed to overcome the systemic global dysfunction that lies underneath.

4. Cultivating compassion and empathy is the basis of education that fosters sustainable change.

5. Only through critical self-reflection do we invite institutional change within the academic world.

6. Contemplative and body-centered practices are essential in coping with change.

7. Capitalism is reinforced through our collective fear of being unproductive
   (Based on among other work, Knijnenburg, L. (2022) 'Weigeren om mee te doen'. De Groene Amsterdammer, nr. 26. June 2022.)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

From personal revelation to an academic understanding of transformation

'Only by giving primary value to the full-bodied world of our face-to-face, and face–to -place encounters, do we have a chance of manoeuvring wisely, and well, among the many other worlds that now claim our attention. Only by being deeply here, in and of this place, am I palpably connected to every other place.' (Abram (2017) in Spell of the Sensuous, p. 284)

Towards a research (quest)ion

Turning inwards to go onwards: from personal revelation to an academic understanding of transformation

In the autumn of 2015, I wrote a position paper to apply for an early-stage research position on 'Ecovillages and Sustainable Living' within the project 'Sustainable Place Shaping'. About two years before, I had started to immerse myself in books, therapy and meditation practices to learn about and experience the value of, amongst other things, (self)compassion. Apart from the benefits I experienced personally, I was intellectually triggered by the theories behind, and the 'promises' made about the cultivation of compassion and self-compassion though contemplative practices including meditation. Numerous studies indicated that compassion for one-self and others make individuals capable of seeing themselves more clearly and making needed changes (Neff, 2011). Compassion and self-compassion have furthermore been related to increased caring for oneself but also others (Jazaieri et al., 2016; Neff & Pommier, 2013; Welp & Brown, 2014), cultivating a sense of connectedness with others (Neff, 2003), successful and sustainable leadership (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005) and pro-environmental values, intentions and donations (Pfattheicher et al., 2016).

It thus seemed that being kind and compassionate towards ourselves is not only good for us, but also for those around us as well as our (nonhuman) environment. This is reflected in perspectives and worldviews centred around the idea of 'interbeing' (Hanh, 1991; Rauschmayer, 2017). Such a worldview is based upon the understanding that we are not separate individuals moving through an environment that exists outside of us, but instead that we only exist in relation to everything else. By transcending the illusion of a dualistic world in which self and other are perceived as separate entities, we can start to get a glimpse of what relationality means. From a perspective of interbeing, how we perceive and treat ourselves is reflected in the way we perceive and treat the world around us. Being harsh on ourselves, rejecting parts of ourselves we do not like and letting ourselves be exploited for the sake of productivity and efficiency, is reflected in the way we treat other people but also the non-human and more-than-human on this planet. For me, this was the first time in which I started to pose myself the question whether the solution to many of the interlinked issues I had been working on before (poverty, food and nutrition security, international development cooperation, sustainability) lacked a fundamental piece of the puzzle, namely the need for shifts in the very personal and inner dimensions of ourselves as citizens in these times and as products of our cultural histories. Could it be that the crisis we witness in the outer world reflects the state of our inner worlds?

The 'inner dimension' of sustainability transformations

Thus far, it had been widely acknowledged that change was both needed and inevitable in the face of today's world most pressing challenges as a result of climate change caused by (unintended) consequences of modernity, alongside interlinked issues including social injustices, violence, war, poverty, food insecurity and so forth. Sustainability research engages with concepts like resilience, adaptation and environmental resource management to better understand how people and communities in various contexts can become more resilient to climate change by adapting practices and institutions to changing and anticipated circumstances (Fedele et al., 2019; B Walker et al., 2004; Zanotti et al., 2020).

Transition experts and transformative researchers have argued that it is not enough to look at resilience and adaptation as these concepts do not address underlying root causes of climate change (Fedele et al., 2019). Debates on the specific definition, meanings and uses of these concepts continue and stress the necessity of a clear definition as well as explicit attention to the normative dimension of research, policy and intervention using one of these concepts (Zanotti et al., 2020).

This research mainly builds on transition research as well as research on transformative and transgressive learning. In the course of the years, more and more scholars in these fields started to engage with the 'inner dimension of sustainability', acknowledging the need to explore and understand better its value in broader transition processes. Kunze and Woiwode (2018) have argued that:

> *'The techno-scientific (outward) focus of a significant part of the discourse around transitions needs to be enriched and complemented with the psychological and spiritual dimensions of life (inward focus) and its future possibilities (p.2). … We argue, that a transition to more sustainable societies, to a more sustainable world, can only succeed through fundamental transformations at the personal and collective levels (p.5).'*

Additionally, they pose that an increasing number of, in this case urban, grassroot initiatives, engage with the inner dimension of change (ibid). As Hathaway (2015: 8) argues, our imaginations of the future are constrained by our particular understanding of reality, our 'cosmovision or worldview'. They go on arguing that we need a new form of cognition rooted in a new vision of reality to be able to address the problems related to sustainability, to be able to see and imagine the path towards a sustainable world. They then add that we might even need 'a different mode of consciousness' for this (ibid). Others describe it as 'a cultural pathology' that requires 'cultural therapy' (O'Sullivan, 1999: 3) or stress the necessity of spiritual renewal in order to understand ourselves to be capable of being more than a 'plague' (Orr, 2002) or 'upright mammalian weed' (Margulis, 1998: 149) on this planet.

Felix Rauschmayer (2017), based on Donna Meadows (1999) argues for the need of mindset shifts for successful change towards more sustainable societies as an alternative to coercive change based on rational arguments or apparent 'win-win' situations. Unfortunately, he argues, there is not much information on what mindset shifts exactly entail nor how to promote them[1]. Some scientific publications do offer some clues, however those paradigms including deep ecology, integral science or action research were, and perhaps still are, often considered to be 'academic borderline' (Rauschmayer 2017). Rauschmayer (2017) argues that practical sustainability experiments in for example ecovillages, transitions towns and the de-growth movement offer more knowledge on mindset shifts through their publications, trainings and other outputs (e.g.(GEESE, 2012)). These initiatives are based on the understanding that mindset shifts require more than intellectual exercise, conscious communication and academic training. Instead, these initiatives suggest that un- and subconscious changes are perhaps more important in transforming intellectual environmental and climate change awareness into action. This asks for an integrated understanding of change that considers individual thinking and acting, cultural embeddedness and systemic opportunities and constraints as interrelated. Such an integrated understanding is reflected in 'integrative worldviews', which gain prominence in movements like the ecovillage movement, but at the time, not so much yet in academic research and publications (Hedlund-de Witt et al., 2014).

Ecovillages: embracing the inner dimension of sustainability

Interesting in these somewhat speculative statements is their reference to grassroot initiatives or 'sustainability experiments' as places that are engaging with inner transitions and the inner dimension of change. This brings us to ecovillages, the topic of the research position I was applying for. In being grassroot sustainability initiatives, ecovillages, I anticipated, are places where people experimented with this idea of transformation, complementing 'outer' changes in life-style, including consumption patterns, food and energy production with actively engaging with their inner worlds, examining deeply ingrained patterns, cultural assumptions and worldviews that influence how we relate to ourselves, each other and the nonhuman world around us. The term 'ecovillage' was used for the first time in 1985 by McLaughin and Davidson, both residents of the Findhorn intentional community in Scotland. They used the term ecovillage to refer to and promote a new kind of living arrangement being small-scale communities using creative problem solving within a loosely bureaucratic structure. The purpose of these communities was to integrate humans and nature in ways that supported the continuity of both (McLaughlin & Davidson, 1985). Ecovillages suggest a particular type of sustainability transformation. Ecovillages come from diverse backgrounds (Dawson, 2004): (1) the ideals of self-sufficiency and spiritual inquiry that have characterized monasteries and

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1   Based on analysis of the UNEP report and the German scientific council report on global change (WBGU 2011) and scientific publications

ashrams;(2) the "back-to-the-land" movement and, later, the co-housing movement; (3) the environmental, peace and feminist movements; (4) the appropriate technology movement; (5) the alternative education movement. In 1995 the Global Ecovillage Movement (GEN) in which several hundred relatively new ecovillages in industrialized countries and networks of perhaps 15,000 traditional villages in non- industrialized countries have come together to share and disseminate knowledge and experience on sustainable living practices (Litfin, 2009). GEN is also increasingly active in political spheres, attending and being invited to European policy making processes and the like. GEN takes a holistic approach to sustainability based upon four dimensions: the social, the cultural, the economic and the ecological dimension (GEN, 2014).

Ecovillages emerged as a response to the major environmental as well as societal and political challenges humanity is facing (Pedersen, 2002; Steffen et al., 2007). These challenges or 'wicked problems' as framed in the sustainability debate, are highly complex and demand innovative approaches in order to be addressed (Galaz et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2009). The approach of ecovillages in response to these challenges fits in the de-growth and localization paradigm (Avelino et al., 2015), part of 'eco-radical' strategies following the categorization of environmental philosophies of Blair & Hitchock (2001). Eco-radicalism is described by Blair and Hitchcock (2001) as alternative thought, deep green ecology, rights of the environment with a strong focus on people and species. It is communitarian and utopian, by-passes capitalism and tries to find ways to opt out of the system (ibid). Eco-radicalism is highly principled and therefore limited to a few scattered communities and unlikely to appeal to the majority as it needs radical lifestyle changes, according to Blair & Hitchcock (2001). It should also be noted that creating a thriving ecovillage is far from easy: nine of ten initiatives fail in achieving this, due to mainly social problems (Leave-Christian in Joubert & Alfred, 2014) and not always is there an actual sense of community within an ecovillage (Čarman, 2015).

Litfin (2009) acknowledges that there are good reasons to question the transformative potential of the 'lifestyle politics of ecovillages' (Litfin, 2009: 124). First of all, the number of ecovillages is rather small and their actions are barely covered in mainstream media and political arenas. Secondly, many individuals in these communities are not organized beyond their community and have therefore little national or transnational influence. Third, it is suggested that local, grassroots initiatives like the voluntary simplicity movement and the local currency movement do not actively counter the broader institutional and structural dynamics that keep the current unsustainable society in place (Princen et al., 2002). Despite these arguments however, Litfin (2009: 125), argues that it would be *"intellectually negligible and pragmatically unwise"* to ignore ecovillages as communities that have shown to be able to dramatically reduce their economic footprint (Dawson, 2006; Simon & Herring, 2003; Tinsley & George, 2006) and *"create models*

of sustainability literally from the ground up" (Litfin 2009: 124-125). Furthermore, Litfin (2009) points at the importance of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) in which thousands of communities have organized themselves to share and disseminate knowledge about alternative and more sustainable lifestyles, thereby challenging the perception of ecovillages as isolated experiments disconnected from one another and wider social and political arenas.

The critique however that initiatives like ecovillages, which are viewed as initiatives mostly engaging with the 'inner dimension' thereby not actively engaging in structural change, does hint at the question whether and how 'inner' and 'outer' change are related and inducive of one another. Furthermore, although certain ecovillages might be too engaged with 'irrational' (Fotopoulos, 1998, 2000), New Age Spiritualism on the detriment of engaging with structural change, it is not necessarily true that most or all of them are.

First of all, there are numerous examples of initiatives that are more focused on creating a new material reality that is more self-sufficient (Meijering, 2012; Westskog et al., 2018). Also there are quite a number of initiatives addressing structural change in which ecovillages are directly or indirectly engaged in, for example through national and international networks like the Global Ecovillage Movement (Kunze & Avelino, 2015; Trainer, 2002) and 'Ecolise', a European network of community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability that specifically aims to influence European and national policy development [2] as well as various forms of political activism, for example by the well-known community of Tamera[3].

Furthermore, as this thesis will elaborately discuss, 'inner change' does not happen in a vacuum. Based upon the assumption that if the material environment influences our consciousness, certain experiences, like creating and living in an ecovillage which has a rather different social and material nature compared to most other modern structures, might then trigger shifts in our consciousness. These changes in consciousness might in turn, according to this logic, change the way we relate to each other and the nonhuman. As Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman (2009) note, *"transformation of individual consciousness cannot occur without supportive changes in body, culture, and eco-social systems"* (p. 7).

Nevertheless, this thread of critique is not invalid either and has also been related to transformative learning theory, which would become the central theory used in this research. I realized, triggered by Newman's (2014) words, that caution was needed to avoid research into the inner dimension of sustainability becoming about 'personal development' in the spirit of a neo-liberal culture of self-development and wellbeing

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2   https://www.ecolise.eu/a-community-led-transition-in-europe/–accessed 3-11-2020
3   https://www.tamera.org/outreach/#Tamera_in_the_world

(Newman, 2014: 347). On the other hand, in line with Litfin (2009) but viewed from a slightly different perspective, Gibson-Graham (2008) offers more reasons why it is important to look at initiatives that create radically new forms of human organization outside the dominant structures, even when they might seem quite small. They argue that as scientists we are trained to be critical, detached and objective which often results in a rather sceptic and negative perspective on everything we lay our hands on, *"not a particularly nurturing environment for hopeful, inchoate experiments"* as Gibson-Graham (2008: 618) argue. They refer to this as the 'paranoid motive in social theorizing' where researchers judge initiatives as inadequate before they are understood in all their complexity and incoherence. They suggest we move away from the idea that research needs to be relentlessly critical and instead ask from theory to *''help us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility" (ibid: 619),* thereby energizing and supporting 'other economies'.

The need to address context and learning in sustainability transformations

Apart from the need to shed light on the inner dimension while not losing sight of structural dynamics underlying unsustainable societies, two other gaps in research and practice on sustainability transformations have been identified. They have to do with the lack of case- and context-specific concerns, and theoretical tools to structure the associated learning processes.

First of all, the *lack of spatial/temporal considerations,* in other words the lack of a place-based approach. As Singh, Keitsch and Shrestha (2019) argue, many interventions around 'sustainability' lack spatial and temporal considerations resulting in a lack of case- and context-specific concerns, objectives, priorities and possibilities as well as a short term vision.

> Box 1. The inner dimension of sustainability
>
> **The inner dimension of sustainability: culture, values, mindsets, worldviews and consciousness**
> Many different concepts have been used to refer to (parts of) the inner dimension of sustainability including mindsets, culture, values, worldviews and consciousness. This research focuses on consciousness, which it understands as slightly different from the related concept of worldviews. Worldviews often still reside in the domain of culture and values, while consciousness goes yet a level deeper, to the very essence of how we 'are' in this world, consciousness is about a different way of 'being' altogether (Daloz, 2004) which includes not only our cognitive perspective of the world we live in, but also the way we inhabit it through our embodied experiences. Consciousness as understood in this thesis is dynamic and constantly created in the space between self, social and material (Newman, 2012, 2014) and the spiritual or metaphysical, even though this spiritual dimension can also be understood as an intrinsic part of all three dimensions, including the physical/material world, as is often found in indigenous ontologies (Abram, 1996). Consciousness in this understanding is thus relational, which means that changes in our material environment influence our consciousness and vice versa. As Hathaway (2015) argues, *"The destruction of the Earth's life-sustaining systems, then, has repercussions for human consciousness. At the same time, both our mode of cognition and our way of perceiving the world contribute to the perpetuation of the crisis." (p. 2).* In some cases, I still refer to worldviews if drawing from a particular scholar or theoretical perspective that uses the concept 'worldview'.

This lack of spatial-temporal considerations, or a place-based approach as I will from now on refer to it, is reflected back in both policy making and theoretical frameworks. As Singh et al (2019) argue, sustainability policy is often based upon criteria that do not consider the context in which certain strategies or actions are to be implemented. Similarly, criteria to assess sustainability interventions presented in theoretical frameworks are often based on advocate's goals and achievements rather than context specific needs, goals and values around sustainability. Singh et al. (2019) therefor argue that there is a need for an integrative approach that incorporates practical implications without losing sight of theoretical knowledge on sustainability development. This asks for place-based interpretations of sustainability to inform strategies and policies for a given context in the long run.

Others advocating advocating for a more place-based approach to sustainability point at the observation that the most innovative solutions often arise as localized, niche innovations rather than top down grand development schemes. It is thus pertinent to understand the potential of place based solutions, which have been shown to be able to spur wider shifts in regimes through transformative place-based solutions (Geels, 2010; Horlings, 2017; Swilling, 2013). This perspective is grounded in a relational understanding of place, in which dualisms between micro and macro phenomena are transcended and understood as entangled (Barad, 2010). Global phenomena are always also rooted and enacted in the local (Massey 1991, 2004).

Secondly, it has been recognized that the learning processes that take place in sustainability transitions or initiatives are not yet well conceptualized. There is a growing body of research on sustainability transitions and transition management and the kinds of solutions they yield (Avelino et al., 2014; Haxeltine et al., 2013; Jørgensen, 2012; Mulgan et al., 2007), but little research has been done on processes of learning that take place in processes of transformation in and towards sustainability initiatives. Many transitions scholars stress the importance of learning in understanding and governing sustainability transitions (Loorbach & Rotmans, 2006; Raven et al., 2008), however *''the associated learning processes have hardly been conceptualised, discussed, and elaborated within the field.''* (van Mierlo & Beers, 2020: 255).

Van Mierlo and Beers (2020) discuss four learning traditions that they consider helpful in conceptualizing learning in sustainability transitions: collaborative learning, organizational learning, social learning in natural resource management and interactive learning in the learning economy, but pose that other learning traditions, including *transformative learning* may provide further valuable insights. Specifically, they mention a few topics that require further research, including the relationship between individual and organizational and system learning and the question of how, and in what context,

learning contributes to transformative change. Another aspect of learning that ought to be considered concerns the normative expectations of learning in sustainability initiatives. Even though 'learning' is a central theme in sustainability transformation discourse, it often has a normative, but more importantly, instrumental goal, which hampers deeper transgressive, transformative and emancipatory learning processes and prevents power inequalities and politics to surface (Armitage et al., 2008; Blythe et al., 2018).

Research aims and questions

To sum up 1) there is a need to better understand the role of the inner dimension in sustainability processes and initiatives while recognizing their embeddedness in and relation to, structural processes, 2) grassroot sustainability initiatives, like ecovillages, tend to engage with this inner dimension, 3) sustainability initiatives, interventions, practices and research often lack spatial/temporal/contextual considerations and 4) the learning processes in sustainability initiatives are not yet well conceptualized.

Theories of transformative learning are considered useful to unravel the learning processes in sustainability transitions. For this thesis the concept of transformative learning has indeed been considered most useful in exploring these learning processes precisely since it allows to specifically look at the inner dimensions of such learning processes when understood as involving a shift in consciousness (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004). As will be elaborately discussed in the theoretical section, this thesis does develop a specific perspective to transformative learning, namely one that addresses the lack of attention to context, specifically the emplaced material or, in other words, the 'place-based' character of sustainability initiatives. With this it addresses the third observation as well as an important shortcoming of traditional theories of transformative learning failing to address the relationship between individual and social/structural change (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015).

This leads to the research questions:
1. How does the dynamic between inner and outer co-produce sustainability in the context of an ecovillage?
2. What kind of learning characterizes this dynamic?
3. Does this learning process hold 'signs' of transformation and transgression? To what extend can this learning be considered transformative/transgressive?

Outline of the thesis

The aim of this research thus is to better understand the dynamic interplay between the more inner oriented learning processes and the more outer oriented learning processes

in co-producing sustainability as an emerging, evolving process. This aim is explored in this thesis theoretically and empirically.

Chapter two provides a **meta-theoretical foundation** which serves as an umbrella under which the theoretical and empirical findings of this thesis are sheltered. The chapter starts by briefly defining the central theoretical concept of this thesis, transformative learning, as a shift from a modern to an ecological consciousness. It then continues to discuss a particular form of transformative learning, 'transgressive learning', which draws attention to the relation between inner shifts in perspective and challenging and changing dominant structures in societies. Following transgressive learning, is the introduction of a place-based research approach which is then linked to a new materialist ontology. The chapter concludes by showing how these different meta-theoretical concepts are nested and together form the base on which the place-based perspective to transformative learning that is developed in this thesis rests.

Chapter three covers the **methodology** of this research. It discusses the ontological base of a place-based and new materialist perspective on which the methodological approach rests. The epistemological foundation lies in phenomenological ethnography. The chapter then presents the methodologies used for empirical research (life-story interviews, photovoice and auto-ethnography) and the approach for data analysis (based on identifying 'significant life experiences' and narrative inquiry). The chapter furthermore zooms into the values that underly this research.

Chapter four is a **theoretical exploration of the concept of transformative learning**, in the form of a published paper (Pisters et al., 2019). The paper includes a critical literature review of transformative learning theory, makes the case for a place-based perspective to transformative learning and finds the three initial building blocks of place-based transformative learning (PBTL): connection, compassion and creativity.

In chapter five, the initial theoretical framework as developed in chapter four, is **tested empirically** by exploring the life-stories of members from three different ecovillages. This paper (Pisters et al., 2020) explores the individual learning journeys of people who committed to a life in an ecovillage. Through this empirical exploration, the PBTL framework is further developed into a four-dimensional framework by including the additional dimension of 'transgression'.

In chapter six, the now four-dimensional framework of PBTL that emerged from chapter five, is **used empirically** to shed light on the more communal processes of (transformative) learning. This paper (Pisters et al., 2022) unravels how the more individually oriented learning processes overlap and feed into more communally oriented learning processes.

Chapter seven is the last empirical chapter of this thesis and reflects upon the learning processes of myself as a researcher engaging with theory and practices of transformation in collaboration with ecovillages. This chapter is a **retrospective auto-ethnographic account** of my personal experiences discussed through the theoretical lens of the PBTL framework.

Chapter eight **discusses the main findings** of this thesis, including those concerning the individual learning journeys of community members, learning as community, learning as researcher and the conceptualization of PBTL as a four dimensional process. The chapter continues with the theoretical as well as practical contributions of this research and reflects upon the methodological approach before **concluding** with the answers to the three research questions.

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Chapter 2

Towards a place-based perspective to transformative learning

'Things, people, creatures intertwine, interweave, yet do not lose the wonder that each is each and yet not without the others' – Glen Mazis

Introduction

This section will discuss the meta theory underlying this thesis. Using a chronological approach, this section tells the story of how the theory was build up. It starts with the initial inspiration that the concept of (self) compassion evoked and how a better understanding of this concept led to reflecting upon the importance of our worldviews and consciousness in relation to the transition to more sustainable societies. Transformative learning was then found to be a useful theoretical approach to research a transition in consciousness. Apart from these concepts, the notion of 'place-based' research has informed this research from the start. Chapter four presents the first theoretical paper which includes a critical literature review of transformative learning theory and suggests the first three 'building blocks' for a place-based approach to transformative learning. This theoretical framework of place-based transformative learning is then further developed throughout the empirical papers presented in chapter five and six.

There are some theoretical concepts that were always latently present but were not explicitly introduced until the second paper. It was at that point that I found theories that helped conceptualize particular themes with more depth. These concepts included new materialism, which provided a particularly suitable ontological basis, partly overlapping with a material phenomenology, which I discuss in more detail in the methodological chapter. Furthermore, transgressive learning was introduced as a specific part of transformative learning that focuses on the notion of challenging unsustainable hegemonic structures. Both of these approaches are shortly discussed in the papers presented in chapter four, five and six. Furthermore, throughout the research, more publications were released exploring the value of insights from new materialism and the New Sciences for transformative learning theory. This section therefore covers the meta-theoretical foundation, including a more elaborate description of the main theories underlying this research and enriching transformative learning theory.

Transformative learning: from a modern to an ecological consciousness

The concept of (self) compassion eventually led me to the theoretical perspectives that underpin this thesis. Given that self-compassion was found to be related to many positive phenomena including altruism, change agency, leadership and environmental values and behaviour I was interested in how (self) compassion is cultivated. One of the first important things I learned was this: compassion towards someone or something, including oneself, can only be experienced if there is an experience of connection first. Bannon (1973) for example explains that

it is only possible to feel compassion towards nature, for example towards a tree, if we feel connected to the tree. This statement implies that our ability to feel and act compassionately in relation to ourselves, each other and our natural environment first of all requires an experience of being connected. It is at this point that the concepts of worldview and consciousness were introduced. Since a modern consciousness and worldview, which is still deeply ingrained in most of us, rests on the premises of separateness, dualism and an inherent disconnection between humans and nonhumans, mind and body and me and you. Many of us do not naturally feel that our lives are deeply intertwined with the life of for example a tree. We might know this rationally, as a tree provides oxygen for us to breath, though most often not empirically. We do not feel and experience a sense of connection when we walk past a tree. A modern consciousness, based on this reasoning, thus does not provide the most fertile ground for cultivating compassion. The alternative to a modern consciousness that is presented in this thesis as a more preferable option in light of the need for a more ecologically and socially just society, is an integrative worldview that includes a more ecological consciousness. A question that arose is how people get to this other consciousness, where they experience themselves as part of, instead of separate. Transformative learning theory was introduced to unravel this learning process. Throughout this thesis a place-based approach to transformative learning emerges from theoretical insight combined with empirical insights.

Box 2. Defining an ecological consciousness

An **ecological consciousness** involves a nature-based spirituality, and is based upon a functional relationship between humans and nature instead of a dysfunctional relationship typical for a modern consciousness. It draws from and includes indigenous ontologies (Higgins-Desbiolles 2009; O'Sullivan and Taylor 2004). Hereby an ecological consciousness includes being conscious of the 'deep relational quality of all reality' and a 'wider sense of connection with all the powers of the world', including, but not confined to, the human community (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004: 13) and a principle of guardianship in human relations with nature (Stewart-Harawira, 2005a, pp. 155–156). This is part of what Hedlund-de Witt (2014: 192) describes as an integrative worldview, 'a worldview attempting to reconcile rational thought and science with a spiritual sense of awe for the cosmos' (Benedikter & Molz 2011; Esbjörn-Hargens & Wilber 2006; Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman2009; Laszlo 2006; Van Egmond & DeVries 2011; Wilber 2001, 2007)'. Unlike other worldviews, an integrative worldview attempts to be 'contradiction-capable', in being an overarching view that holds many different perspectives understanding them as different pieces of the puzzle. An integrative worldview thus combines rational scientific knowledge as well as indigenous, nature-based spirituality and ontology.

> **Box 3. Defining a modern consciousness**
>
> A **modern consciousness** involves a modernist mode of thinking and acting in which everything becomes a means (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004: 13). More specifically, a modern consciousness can be described with the use of six key components, based upon Berger, Berger and Kellner (1974) who identified how industrial technology was internalized into the modern western consciousness. Although rather outdated work, their concepts still seem very useful for describing the modern consciousness. The six elements include: 1) componentiality, the idea that reality is compartmentalized, distinct components that work together like parts of a machine; 2) multi-relationality, complex systems and components that work simultaneously on many levels, which makes it difficult to understand what is going on and how to change this. This results in increased reliance on experts and specialists as well as an information overload; 3) speed, organizing life according to clock and calendar, having a preference for high speed and fast processes, understanding time as a commodity that can be exchanged for money; 4) rationality, including theoretical rationality in science and philosophy as well as functional rationality imposed by technology on daily lives, facing problems by rational analysis; 5) maximization, more, bigger and better is always desirable, leading to consumerism and a preference for progress and efficiency; 6) novelty, fascination with the new, belief that new products, services etc improve quality of life, resulting in competition.

In the first published paper (chapter 4), the shift from a modern to an ecological consciousness has been explored through **transformative learning** (TL) theory. O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004) specifically developed an ecological perspective to transformative learning and define transformative learning as a shift in consciousness from a modern, instrumental to an ecological consciousness. As their definition does not involve reference to the process of TL, this thesis started with the definition of TL by Morrel & O'Connor (2002), which complements O'Sullivan and Taylor's by understanding TL as: *'a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. A shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy'* (Morrell & O'Connor, 2002: xvii)

The concept of transformative learning is elaborately discussed in chapter 4.

More recently, scholars have started rethinking transformative learning theory in an even more radical way, building on the emerging field of the 'New Sciences' and new materialism. As Lange (2018) argues, traditional theories of transformative learning and education are incompatible to address the challenges we face today. Transformative education needs transformation and important insights feeding this transformation should come from relational ontologies based on the 'New Sciences' informed by insights from quantum physics and living system theory as well as indigenous and eastern worldviews,

which share surprisingly similar insights and perspectives (Lange 2018). Together these inform the philosophy and theories of a performative 'new materialism' (Barad, 2003).

From the beginning, a new materialist ontology has been latently present in this research starting with a first attempt at taking 'matter' seriously by making the case for a place-based understanding of transformative learning (chapter 4). From this perspective, transformative experiences are understood as part of 'place', places as experienced and 'lived from within'(Abram, 1996: 65) by the intelligent human body, which is part of the world that he or she experiences. This allows for understanding narrative events and experiences, upon which this thesis is mostly based (see methodology), as having happened 'somewhere', as belonging to a place, the particularities of places coming into being through events and experiences and at the same time places are active elements in events and experiences (Abram, 1996: 163). The role of a place-based approach as well as a new materialist ontology in this thesis will be discussed in more detail after a discussion of the concept of transgressive learning.

Transgressive learning as a type of transformative learning responds to the missing link (or lack of explicit attention) between transformative learning and social/structural change. Transgressive learning was introduced in the second paper as a concept that explained the sense of 'critique' that was found to underly processes of transformative learning in ecovillagers. Transgressive learning is concerned with learning that results in and from structural change. Transgressive learning is about challenging the taken for granted, normalized status quo of global systemic dysfunction and the link between individual (cognitive) change to social action or agency. It is about resisting the old systems that no longer serve us and the social agency to disrupt those while creating new ones. As such, transgressive learning as a type of transformative learning, specifically focuses on activism and normative interventions, with the aim of creating cognitive, epistemic, social and environmental justice (Chaves et al., 2017).

Transgressive learning emerged in response to the need for theorization of the link between individual cognitive transformations and social action or agency, a link that could not be fully captured by traditional theories of transformative learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). Furthermore, the concept of transgressive learning responds to a growing awareness in sustainability and social-ecological-system research that resilience thinking is not necessarily inducive to social and ecological sustainability and that instead there is need for 'resistance' thinking, centred around the question how to break down the resilience of unsustainable systems that are causing global dysfunction(Neocleous, 2013). Similarly, Olssen et al. (2015) argue for taking up agency, power, conflict and contradiction theory in ecological sustainability research.

Transgressive learning responds to this need for a decolonialized perspective on transformative learning (Lotz-Sistika et al. 2015). Transgressive learning is grounded in a number of different theoretical strands, the first being **reflexive social learning**. This approach argues for a reflexive and systemic way of thinking and acting in a world characterized by constant change and ever-present uncertainty. Not just problem solving, but addressing challenges in an ever changing and uncertain context. This requires constant reflexive feedback loops.

The second approach is the **capabilities theory**, through which transformative and transgressive learning is understood as a capability, contributing in and by itself to human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2009) and freedom (Sen, 1999). Based on this perspective, people have a moral right to transform and transgress (Kronlid, 2014).

Third, **critical phenomenology** which is grounded in a number of different perspectives including deep ecology, embodied ecological citizenship, animism, social sculpture anthropology. A phenomenological approach is based on transgressing boundaries between inner and outer worlds which is a means of developing transformative and transgressive agency. Direct encounters and experiences can lead to democratic participation and social action within the local environment (in which the direct encounters take place) (Greenwood, 2009: 275). Critical phenomenology specifically focuses on the way social structures normalize and naturalize power relations, which influence our perception and experiences of them (Guenther, 2019). Structures in the 'outer world' can influence our perception and shape our consciousness just as our perception and consciousness can (re)shape structures in the outer world (ibid). This links to place based research, as this perspective understands how 'culture and place are deeply intertwined' (McKenzie et al., 2009: 7). From this understanding, places and geographies have the potential to be transformative/transgressive forces that are profoundly pedagogical in themselves (Greenwood 2009:217). This approach takes the phenomenological experience of a learner as central, through which dualisms between object and subject, place and person fall away. This does not imply abandoning reasoning and philosophical thought but rather enriching it. This latter process investigated in this thesis.

Fourth, transgressive learning is grounded **in socio-cultural and cultural historic activity theory**. This approach concerns multi-actor social learning processes. Research shows how expansive social learning processes create learning cultures that are expansive and which stimulate transformative (social) agency, thereby leading development. Social learning is hereby thus linked with systemic change and transformation (Engeström & Sannino, 2010; Masara, 2010; Mukute & Lotz-Sisitka, 2012). Key in this type of learning is including and valuing multiple voices and engaging with contradictions that may arise from this (Engeström, 2015; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). These learning processes may

give rise to new forms of agency including resistance, critique, explication, reframing, envisioning, committing to actions, navigating power relations and taking transformative action (Heikkilä & Seppänen, 2014).

Lastly, transgressive learning is inspired by **new social movement, postcolonial and decolonization theory**. This perspective states that learning should always aim to contribute to equal, just societies and a dignified life. To do this it is essential to turn towards the contradictions that present cultures engender, through shedding light on everyday struggles and lived experiences of oppression. An example is the learning from the contradictions that arise in the encounters between different ontologies in intercultural gatherings where a 'multiplicity of worlds' encounter one another (Chaves et al., 2017). Another example is counter-hegemonic mapping in educational contexts (Sefa Dei 2019 & Belay 2012 in Lotz-Sisitka 2015).

Transformative learning theory versus other learning theories

The place-based perspective of transformative learning deployed in this thesis embraces all types of learning described below and is in that sense not to be understood as an alternative to other learning theories. However, the term 'transformative', specifically coined with 'place-based' does have a purpose pointing at a particular learning process, that both social learning and experiential learning not always explicitly address.

Closely related to transformative learning is social learning. Although social learning can be transformative (e.g. in (Dirwai, 2020)), there is nothing transformative in social learning processes per se (Glasser, 2007). Although social learning embodies many aspects of TL, it is often used to refer to learning leading to adaptive behaviour (coping with the effects of climate change, changing policies etc), instead of behaviour following from, or triggering, transformation in consciousness and lifestyle. Understood from a perspective of adaptation, social learning is necessary for survival and involves adjustments in preparation, or reaction to, social and ecological change. However, adaptation strategies do not necessarily address the fundamental root causes of for example climate change (Fedele et al., 2019). Glasser (2007) distinguishes between passive and active social learning, whereby passive social learning typically hampers (transformative) change as it relies on the passive receiving of the wisdom of others, often experts. As such, passive social learning can be used to support agendas and interests of hegemonic institutions that favour particular narrow interest over the common good, including environmental and human wellbeing. Active social learning on the other hand is based on conscious interaction and is always dialogical, rather than a one-way process. Active social learning can be hierarchical, non-hierarchical or based on co-learning, whereby co-learning actively supports change and can promote societal shifts towards sustainability.

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Active social learning can also occur through engaging in activities that embody ecological values (e.g. community garden)(Glasser, 2007). This type of active social learning contextualizes the learning and invites accountability, which are both factors that help close the gap between values and action, reflecting a place-based approach. Whether active social learning translates into action depends on whether those involved in social learning are effective in capacity building towards a certain change. Some forms of active social learning, especially hierarchical forms, can also be used for maladaptive causes, e.g the holocaust. In conclusion, there is a specific type of active social learning based on non-hierarchical and co-learning that is an inherent part of PBTL. The place-based character is sometimes (examples of Glasser 2007 including organic farming, green building, ecological design) but definitely not all the time, explicitly part of this type of social learning.

Another type of learning that is an inherent part of TL is experiential learning. Transformative learning can be understood as a type of experiential learning. Experiential learning focuses on subjective, conscious and intentional experiences as the source of learning, a form of 'radical empiricism' (Kolb 2015 based on the work of William James). Experiential learning has its origins in the work of Dewey, Piaget and Lewin (Dewey, Piaget and Lewin in Glasser, 2007). Rational/cognitive learning theories tend to focus only on the acquisition, manipulation and recall of abstract symbols while behavioural learning theories deny any role for conscious and subjective experiences in learning (Glasser, 2007). Experiential learning aims to complement rationalist and cognitive learning theories and behavioural learning theories in order to provide a more holistic theory of learning (Kolb, 2015: 31). Kolb rightly notes that an experience in itself does not per se evoke a learning process, as an experience in itself will not manifest truth without a complementing process of learning that 'questions the preconceptions of direct experience, tempers the vividness and emotion of direct experience with critical reflection and extracts the direct lessons from the consequences of action' (p. xxi Introduction). Kolb created the Experiential Learning Theory to explain how experience is transformed into learning and reliable knowledge (ibid). This process, in reference to both learning from practice and experiential learning, requires a reflexive process as well as an engagement with others and their perspectives (Macy, 1998) to become aware of the cultural lens through which someone experiences, as 'experience is already overlaid and saturated with the products and reflections of past generations and by-gone ages' (Dewey, 1925 p.40 in Kolb, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, the transition to a more sustainable world can only succeed through fundamental transformations at the personal and collective levels (Kunze & Woiwode, 2018), and thus in a sustainability or climate change related context ''*it is necessary to bring transformative learning processes more explicitly to the fore*" (Kronlid & Lotz-Sisitka, 2014).

A place-based approach to research

Transformative learning theory, including transgressive learning as a specific, underacknowledged, aspect of transformative learning, form the basis of this thesis. This theoretical basis is supported by two underlying theoretical currents: place-based research and performative new materialism/material phenomenology. These two perspectives support the theoretical basis by deepening some of its ontological, epistemological and consequently also methodological premises.

From the beginning, this research was nested in a so called **place-based approach** which elaborates on the relational nature of 'place', on place as unit of analysis in sustainability research and the normative implications of place-based research. After discussing place-based research, involving work of scholars discussing place-based learning rather than a mere sociological perspective, the section will continue to break down dualisms between inner/outer, places/people, subject/object, human/nonhuman, structure/agency through the lens of a new materialist ontology.

As briefly mentioned before, transformative learning theories have been criticised for their lack of acknowledging the context in which learning takes place, which, instead of being a passive stage, plays an active role in transformative learning processes. A place-based approach to transformative learning responds to this point of critique. The approach of ecological place-based education (or eco-pedagogies) aims to integrate both perspective by emphasizing place and the value of 'reinhabiting' places as well as the need for transformation, decolonization and critique (Gruenewald, 2003). Furthermore, a place-based approach, in contrast to a technocratic one, assumes that current environmental and resource vulnerabilities demand solutions that build on the specific resources, assets, capacities and distinctiveness of places (Healey et al., 2003; L.G. Horlings, 2017; Marsden & Bristow, 2000; Murdoch, 2000; Roep et al., 2015; Tomaney, 2010).

At the same time a place-based approach recognizes the deeply networked nature of 'places', further exacerbated by globalization (Massey, 2005). Place-based approaches appreciate the importance of local social, cultural and institutional characteristics while recognising the global influences which encounter and interact with, such place-based specificities (Horlings, 2015). A place-based approach, in line with practice theory, understands that everyday practices and relations reproduce structural relations, and thus structural relations can also be changed through changes in everyday practices and new relations (Horlings, et al. 2020). Place-based approaches can understand place as relational and networked, but also in some cases as territorial and bounded (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; L.G. Horlings, 2015; Jessop et al., 2008). These two perspectives on place are not mutually exclusive but may serve different purposes. Place based approaches

argue that rather than grand schemes based on a 'one size fits all' approach, transformative solutions emerge at the local level (Barca et al., 2012; Geels, 2010; Haxeltine et al., 2013; Roep et al., 2015). It is at this level that the complexity and interlinked nature of complex nexus issues can be grasped and solutions created that draw from, and are responsive to, particular place-based configurations. This assumption is in line with transition research showing how 'niche' innovations can lead to wider social and structural changes (Geels, 2010; Swilling, 2013). Similarly, performative new materialism, which will be discussed in the next section, also transcends culture/material dualism (Barad, 1996) as well as micro, meso and macro levels of analysis (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013). As, Fox and Alldred (2015: 402) explain, there is nothing to prevent a relation conventionally thought of as 'micro' (e.g. a consumer transaction) and a 'macro' relation (e.g. a nation-state) to be drawn into assemblage by an affective[1] flow; consequently, an assemblage may contain disparate elements from these different levels. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind the different ways in which sustainability initiatives can have impact, beyond the more classical conceptions of 'scaling'. A recent study exploring the scalability of such local initiative indicate the importance of noticing not just ways of scaling up and scaling out, but also of scaling *deep*, referring to increasing impact by changing values and mindsets (Lam et al., 2020).

Place-based sustainability initiatives have been conceptualized in different strands of sustainability research as social innovations (Wittmayer et al., 2015), grassroot initiatives (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013) and sustainability initiatives (Lam et al., 2020). The practices in these place-based sustainability initiatives are driven by the energy and imagination of people while grounded in the ecology and materiality of places (Marsden, 2012).

A place-based approach links to visions of the capability approach in climate change research where it is thought that individuals affected by climate change should themselves identify their valued beings and doings, instead of experts defining it for them. Ideally, the required freedom is provided for people to live the life they have, *upon reflection* reason to value (Kronlid, 2014: 9-10). The 'upon reflection' is an important aspect in this line of thought as it is not a matter of just 'doing whatever you want', following ego, but identifying what it is someone truly values in life after a reflective learning process. This learning process then can be understood as a capability (ibid). The kind of life

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1   In a Deleuzian–Guattarian ontology, which Fox & Alldred (2015) follow based on Deleuze & Guattari (1988), the concept of agency is replaced with the idea of 'affect', meaning to affect or be affected. This implies that in an assembly, agency is not possessed by single entities, but agency rather lies in the interactions between entities affecting and being affected by one another. These affects lead to a change in the state or capacity of an entity or assembly of multiple entities. An affect is thus a becoming: a change in the social, psychological, physical or emotional realm. Similar to Barad's 'agential realism', it is based upon the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies.

people value will be different in different places. Given the complexities of place/space networks in todays globalized world, climate adaptations become a deeply complex issues (Kronlid, 2014: 13), requiring a constant and dynamic learning and feedback process in which experimentation, adjustment and uncertainty are to be embraced. These insights are all reflected in the place-based approach to transformative learning that is developed throughout this thesis.

New Materialism
A **new materialist ontology** deepens and gives more sustenance and complexity to the place-based approach by acknowledging the inherent agency of human but also more-than-human matter. Sustainability initiatives from this perspective are place-based phenomena that emerge from the intra-actions between human and non-human entities.

New materialism understands the material, 'objective' world not as a passive stage upon which human life is acted out but instead as alive and meaning-making through the intra-actions between different human and nonhuman entities, within and between ecosystems, neurotransmission, plants, animals and so forth. New materialism rejects a human centric approach limiting agency and relationality to human social life only. New materialist ontology transcends 'the mind-matter and culture- nature divides of transcendental humanist thought' (Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010: 155). New materialism emerged as a cross-disciplinary effort to challenge deeply ingrained assumptions of a dualistic world, most notable in the prevailing human- nonhuman matter divide (Gamble et al., 2019) as well as other social theory dualisms including structure/agency, reason/emotion, human/non-human, animate/inanimate and inside/outside (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Gamble et al (2019), distinguish between three different, current types of materialism[2]: vital new materialism, negative new materialism and performative new materialism. They argue that only a performative new materialism effectively challenges the dualisms (human-nature) and anthropocentrism new materialists claim to oppose. Before discussing its theoretical content, performative new materialism positions itself based on three premises. First of all, performative new materialism does not claim to be a novel perspective but acknowledges historical materialist philosophies and specifically the similarity between performative new materialism and indigenous ontologies. Secondly, performative new materialism builds onto feminist theories of matter (e.g. Judith Butler) by pointing out the inherent dynamic and meaningful character of matter, typically lacking in those theories. Lastly, performative new materialism does not embrace science uncritically but understands

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2   based on other work including Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., Material Feminisms (Minnea- polis: Indiana UP, 2008); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010); Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds., New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities, 2012))

scientific practice and discourse as 'productive of the very world they describe as is any other action (human or otherwise)' (Gamble et al., 2019: 112).

The western world historically holds material philosophies, considered the '*old materialisms*'. The oldest acknowledged one being Greek atomism, a perspective depriving everything, including humans of any agency at all. Reality as we know it, including ourselves, is the result of random, accidental collisions of atoms. This was followed by a 'modern' old materialism which solves the problem of agency and force with an active vital power external to matter. A force or divine entity (God) which can explain the movement and manifestation of matter into forms we can discern. Both ancient and modern old materialism deny matter any self-determining agency and assume that only humans have the ability, through thought, to access the true nature of matter, know its fundamental properties, thus assigning humans an exceptional position, external to matter. This can be linked to the Human Exceptionalism Paradigm which claims that human culture is capable of solving all natural problems: potential limitations posed upon human progress by the natural world can be overcome through human ingenuity (Dunlap et al., 2002; Dunlap & Catton, 1978, 1980, 1994). The New Ecological Paradigm that Catton and Dunlap (1980) introduced in the 1980's already pointed at a relational, place-based and new materialist perspective by acknowledging that humans remain ecologically interdependent with other species and are themselves an inherent part of the biophysical environment.

Besides the old materialisms, Gamble et. al. (2019), have defined a second category *'failed materialism',* a new materialist perspective which according to Gamble et al. (2019) fails to actually be materialist. Failed materialism denies the ability to grasp reality to humans as well. Failed new materialism includes according to the authors, Kant's correlationalism as well as Judith Butler's and Jacques Lacan's materialism. Failed materialism and constructivist theories claim that there is a discontinuity between the ultimate reality and the construction of reality by humans (Lacan 1978; Lacan & Miller 1998 mentioned in Gamble et al., 2019). Lacan states that the Real is characterized by an absolute lack of meaning, only humans create (an always fractured and incomplete) image of the real through language. Butler (Butler, 2011; Kirby, 1997), although acknowledging that discourse can be influenced and changed by matter, still states that discourse can never fully capture the essence of matter, thereby placing discourse outside of matter. Failed materialism is thus based upon ontological division between human discourse and matter, according to Gamble et al. (2019).

What distinguishes *new materialism* from *old* and *failed materialism* is the acknowledgement of the intrinsic activity of matter. Besides performative new materialism, two other types of new materialism can be found: vital and negative new materialism. Vital new

materialism assumes that there is an immanent power, or intrinsic vitality to matter. The nature of this immanent force is unknown though, which makes it, according to Gamble et al. (2019) an ontology of forces rather than matter. Following this focus on the force that makes matter move, vital new materialism is mainly concerned with life, activity and agency, unable to account for the entangled relationship between life and death, activity and passivity/receptivity. Privileging life over nonlife can be problematic when it comes to deciding what is alive and what is not, as bodies associated with nonlife tend to be exploited and expropriated under certain circumstances. Furthermore, the assumption of a force, either natural or godly, that precedes material relationships and movement outsources responsibility to this force thereby risking becoming an apolitical and ahistorical perspective (ibid).

Negative new materialism is based upon speculative realism (Meillassoux, 2010; Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010) and object-oriented-ontology (OOO) (Harman, 2011; Morton, 2011). It proposes that matter is non-relationally external to thought and that thought is strictly confined to humans only. Negative new materialisms embrace the existence of 'hyperobjects' (Morton, 2011) essential forms that infinitely exceed the human domain of meaning making, that as it were, have started to live a life on their own. An example of which is the phenomenon of global warming. This clashes with a relational understanding of place following Doreen Massey (2004, 2005), who argues that global phenomena are locally rooted and depend upon day-to-day practices and discourses. Whether global phenomena are understood relationally or non-relational has implications for our sense of responsibility and agency.

The third type of new materialism is performative new materialism, the only new materialist perspective that effectively challenges human nature dualist thinking, according to Gamble et al. (2019). Although critical voices (Bruining, 2016) continue to argue that also the performative perspective of Karen Barad is based upon partly fault assumptions of for example failed materialism including Judith Butlers work, this thesis embraces the general line of thought of performative new materialism. Performative new materialism is mainly based upon the work of Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2017) and Vicky Kirby (see e.g. Kirby, 1997 in Fraser, 2010). This research specifically draws from Barad's work. Performative new materialism is characterised as pedetic, an ongoing iterative process, and as fully relational. A performative new materialist ontology understands agency not as something that certain entities inherently possess or not, but as something that arises in the *intra-actions* between entities. The commonly used *interaction* assumes pre-existing entities that independently interact with one other whereas *intra-actions* acknowledge a mutual becoming, in which entities become with each other in an entangled relationship (Barad, 2010). This performative new materialist ontology thus poses that 'the performances of humans are not external to those of the rest of the material

world' and hence, 'this view also leads, importantly, to a performative understanding of science in which every act of observing also constitutes, at once, a transformation of what is being observed.' (Gamble et al. 2019: 112). Barad's theory is about 'agential realism' where matter, unlike social constructivism, *matters* AND is understood to be imbued with agential power, not as passive 'dead' material (rational/objective realism). Humans are and evolve in relation to, and in intra-action with, all that is non-human.

This philosophy transcends nature/culture, subject/object, knower/object-to-be-known dualisms. It also touches the phenomenology of a materialist environmental ethics as found in for example deep ecology. In his book, Spell of the Sensous, David Abram (1996, 2017)uses the concept of 'perceptual reciprocity' based on Merleau – Ponty's phenomenological philosophy. If everything is made up of the same *stuff,* he argues, perception is always reciprocal, if I perceive you, I'm also being perceived by you, if I touch, I feel at the same time myself being touched, be it by a human or nonhuman entity. As Abram (1996, 2017) argues, if we are all organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, the world experiences itself *through* us. We are part of the world and through our physical, material and sensory body we are able to perceive it, just as everything around us. From this perspective, we as humans are no longer the sole actors on a dead, objective, determined and non- agentic 'stage' that we often perceive our environment to be, but instead we are entities amidst other entities that are in constant reciprocal relation to each other, reacting to what we perceive and our existence acknowledged by being perceived. In other words, we are in a constant 'cosmic dance', the words which Lange (2018) uses to describe the lived experience of this entanglement.

This performative new materialist perspective takes the place-based approach to another level. When nothing exists as an objective, non-relational phenomena, the idea of 'time' or history do not either (Barad, 2017). Consequently, time, history and futures are emplaced, and there is thus not a single road to human improvement[3], but instead many different paths situated in actual environments. This also links to the capability approach which argues that 'different people value different ways of being and doing' (Kronlid 2014) that all have merit. Multiple 'truths' exist as what is true in one place has developed in an intimate relationality between the humans and nonhuman entities in that particular place and might thus differ from what is understood as true in another place. This paves way for multiple times and histories, where modern linear clock time is not the only time, but also multiple futures. All of this in turn points at the need for an integrative consciousness in which different ontologies and epistemologies can co-exist.

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3   Reflected in John Mohawks essay on indigenous lifestyles in "The Right of Animal Nations to Survive," DAYBREAK MAGAZINE, Summer, 1988, Highland, MD.

Meta-theoretical framework

The visual below shows how all the above discussed theoretical perspectives relate to one another. Starting with the soil, reflecting the place-based approach of this research. The roots of the tree, reflecting a performative new materialist ontology, 'pierce' the soil and firmly anchor the trunk and branches. The trunk in turn reflects the central theory of this thesis, transformative learning, with transgressive learning as a specific type of transformative learning. From this basis of soil, roots and trunk branches grow that seasonally produce and release leaves. These branches reflect the output of this thesis: the development of a place-based approach to transformative learning.
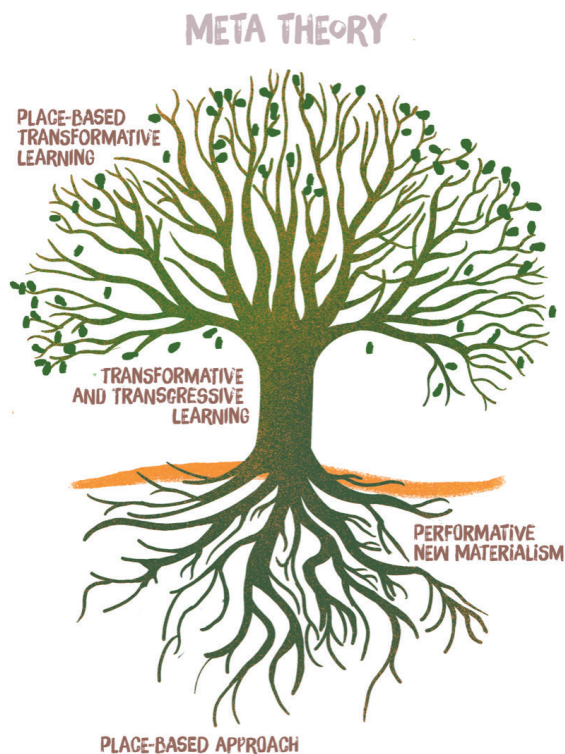
Figure 1. Meta-theoretical foundation of place-based transformative learning

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Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter I will discuss the methodological approach used for this research. The chapter starts with a short introduction presenting the underlying line of thought and guiding principles upon which the methodology is based. At the end of this short introduction, the methodological approach used for this research is visually presented for the reader to get an overview before turning to the in-depth descriptions of each of the different elements. Guided by figure 2, the chapter continues with a discussion of the underlying ontological foundation of the methodology (being a place-based perspective), after which I will turn to discuss the epistemological foundation (phenomenological ethnography). The chapter then continues with the actual methods used (life-story interviews, photovoice and autoethnographic inquiry) and a description of the fieldwork. The chapter ends with a discussion of how the data was analysed though narrative inquiry and a focus on 'significant life experiences' (SLE's).

Introduction

To start with, this research has been carried out as part of a Marie Curie ITN funded project 'SUSPLACE' (2016- 2019). All fieldwork has been organized and carried out within the project time frame. The main aim of this sub-research project on ecovillages and sustainable living within SUSPLACE was to unravel if and how an ecovillage lifestyle involves a different kind of worldview or consciousness and if so what the shift towards a more ecological consciousness entail.

This research is grounded in the values of diversity, inclusivity (social, economic, spatial as well as ontological and epistemological), collaboration, trust and integrity. It aims to contribute to a socially and ecologically just world by shedding light on the potential of people to flourish in communion with each other and the non-human world, thereby opening up 'spaces of possibility'. It recognizes the challenges that inevitably rise up when a group of people tries to manifest an alternative vision of the future. It aims to honour the complexity of such a learning process and the courage of the community members that have embarked on this journey.

As a person and as a researcher I support the notion that addressing climate change requires more than top down technological solutions. It requires addressing our culture, worldview, perceptions, values and 'imagination'. In the words of Amitav Gosh (2016): *"For let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination"*. Or as the economist Mariana Mazzucato states, we need to realize that nothing will change unless we are convinced that a better life is possible (Mazzucato, 2021). This research therefore looks at communities that have imagined and manifested a different way of living, of relating to each other and the non-human world.

The methodological approach was designed around the challenge of how to 'measure' or more accurate for this research 'sense' signs of shifts in worldview/consciousness. Signs make plausible that something is happen whereas 'evidence' proofs something is happening or has happened. As Felix Rauschmayer (2017: 5) rightly points out, how to 'assess' transition or transformative processes or initiatives is complicated: *"This year, I have stayed 2 months in a monastery in France in very simple conditions also with the intention to further transform my worldview. Have I succeeded?".* The values upon which to assess transformative processes are unclear, highly subjective and debatable (ibid). The methodology therefor was informed by theoretical concepts that emerged from literature research (chapter 4), but at the same time was 'open' enough to allow the emergence of different and additional themes through empirical research, which would hence modify and build upon initial theoretical concepts, in line with ethnography as iterative-inductive research (O'Reilly, 2012).

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Research based on an integrative consciousness would imply not just a theoretical openness and acknowledgement of the possibility of e.g. more-than-human agency, a spirited world, intuitive knowledge etc. but also a methodological one. However, researching sustainability initiatives that embody more integrative worldviews within classical academia, which is still mostly based on modern and post-modern worldviews, is a challenging paradox to navigate (Rauschmayer 2017). Rauschmayer (2017) points out that the Global Ecovillages Network stresses "*the necessity of inner individual change embedded in collective action, experimental living, and political action, often resulting in a worldview change*". This, he argues goes far beyond classical transition studies, which most of the time stays at the level of social innovation (ideas, social relations, models, rules) and discourses on change and innovation (ibid). In developing the methodology for this research, I therefore explored ways to resolve this paradox by looking for methodological approaches that embodied and could capture a more integrative consciousness. In 2014, Annick Hedlund-de Witt (2014) wrote that empirical studies that ethnographically explored an integrative worldview and describing and analysing the views and cultural meaning held by individuals who arguably embodied such a integrate worldview were rare. Although, as she argued, integrative worldviews are promising in generating life-enhancing 'sustainable social imaginary', and as such are worth looking into. In the years that followed, some authors have done (Chaves et al., 2017; Lange, 2018; Rauschmayer, 2017) and I have tried as well with this research.

To research processes of place-based transformative learning, the methodological approach has been built upon the elements depicted in the figure below and discussed in the following sections of this chapter.
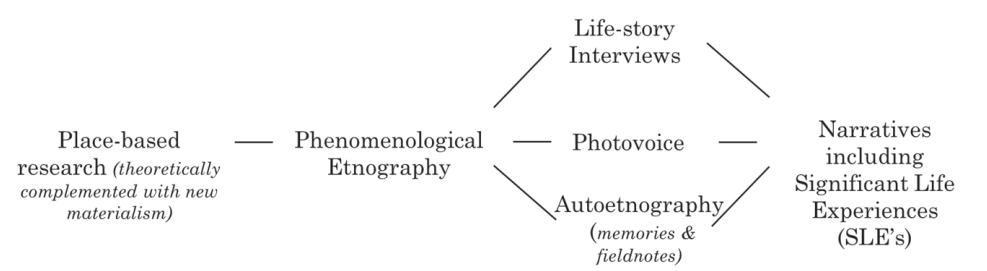
Figure 2. Visual representation of the methodological framework

Ontological foundation: contextualizing learning processes through a place-based research approach

Place-based research results from the recent 'material turn' in the social sciences, moving away from an anthropocentric inquiry of a human drama acted out in a nonhuman, non-agential, static place. Instead, 'place' is understood in this thesis as human / non-human assemblages (see chapter 2 for an elaborate description). The place-based approach influenced the research scope and 'unit of analysis' in deliberately focusing on place-based developments instead of macro-technocratic schemes or projects.

From the beginning, this research focused on place as a relational assemblage of human and nonhuman entities. Thereby I acknowledged the material when talking about the context in which TL takes place, with the aim of transcending modern dualism and social constructivism. Although the methodology used for this research is not necessarily typically 'new materialist', these factors can be found back in a performative new materialist ontology (Gamble et al., 2019), which is part of the meta-theoretical foundation of this research. In a methodological approach guided by the principles of new materialism, the focus of social inquiry shifts from being concerned only with the beings, doings and becomings of human beings, examining instead how these are inherently entangled in relational networks or assemblages in which entities affect and are affected[1] (DeLanda, 2006; Mulcahy, 2012; Youdell & Armstrong, 2011). Schadler (2019) points out that authors of the main theoretical texts on new materialism do not provide methodological suggestions and thus sociologists have to find useful methods and tools themselves. Whether this research is in fact grounded in new materialist methodology or remains within the more classical social science methodological approaches of ethnography and hermeneutical research is a question without a strait forward or definite answer. For a number of reasons this research does not fully fit a new materialist methodology, it is not post-qualitative, it is based upon hermeneutical, interpretative analysis. However, as mentioned above, there are also aspects of this research that would make it qualified as new materialist inquiry/phenomenology (McGregor, 2020). In any case, the methodological approach for this research has first of all been built upon a place-based approach to research and as explained in the theory (chapter 2), a place-based perspective is grounded in some of the key premises of new materialism.

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1   Definition of affectivities in Youdell & Armstrong (2011): 'eruptions and flows of bodily sensation and the encounters between these eruptions and flows as well as between bodies (Deleuze and Guattari, 2008; Hickey-Moody and Malins, 2007). These affectivities are not the property of subjects. Rather, they are before thought, emotion or interpretation (Hickey-Moody and Malins, 2007), and so are prepersonal, experiential states of bodies that impact what a body can do (Massumi, 2008).'

Since the theoretical chapter already discusses place-based research and new materialism extensively, I will stick to discussing some key premises of this research that characterizes it as place-based.

First of all, data is not understood to be a product that an objective researcher who is positioned outside that which he/she studies derives. Instead, it is understood as an iterative phenomenon created in the intra-action between researcher, participants, place, research apparatus (methodologies used). These make up 'the research assemble' which comprises 'the bodies, things and abstractions that get caught up in social inquiry, including the events that are studied, the tools, models and precepts of research, and the researchers' (Fox & Alldred, 2015: 400). From a perspective of place-based research, this means that we understand the researcher to be part of the places they research. And while residing in those places during fieldwork, or interacting with these places from a distance (e.g. sharing knowledge, research findings, online interviews and communication etc.), the researcher simultaneously is co-shaping those places while also being shaped by those places. From this understanding, place-based researchers rarely identify with just the role of traditional, reflective scientist. Most often, as is also the case in for example action research, more than one role is taken up. The different roles a research can take have been identified by Wittmayer and Schapke (2014), and confirmed in the context of place-based research (Horlings et al., 2020). In this paper (ibid) we describe this type of place-based researcher as an 'embodied' researcher, who engages with the places they research with their head, heart, hands and feet. In my case I have taken the up the roles of reflective and self-reflective scientist (whereby I understand self-transformation to be a valid outcome of research too) as well as the role of facilitator.

Secondly, this orientation implies being open to what kind of data emerges from the research assemblage, acknowledging that there are many influencing factors that are beyond the control of the researcher. Furthermore, it acknowledges participants and community members as active agents in the research assemblage, in this case by giving them an active role in participatory research through photovoice and the power to suggest topics to discuss, both in the interviews as through photovoice where focus group discussions were open to see what kind of topics emerge and 'want to be discussed' (Scharmer, 2009).

Third, a place-based approach leads to understanding participants experiences, learning journeys and hence SLE's as emplaced, based on the understanding that experience is always contextualized. During the interviews, attention was therefor paid to the context in which certain experiences took place, the influence of being in certain places on participants and the relationship between participants and their non-human and more-than-human environment. This, for example, included consideration for the response of,

or changes in, the material environment that could be linked to shifts in consciousness. Hereby I opened up to the notion that the material/nonhuman world can be agentic and thus respond to human interventions and practices. This included talking about for example how nature responding to particular human intervention, how sunlight can be experienced as a spiritual phenomenon, communication with animals and trees, horses having an active role in trainings, a spiritual stone circle and working with the land/farming as spiritual experience. It thus supplies a conception of agency not tied to human action or individual agency possessed by an individual entity.

Fourth, the research involved active engagement with materiality and place through photography. Hereby the research aimed to elicit the meaning of being in the ecovillage as place through sensory experience by giving the material and non-human environment a presence in the research. Furthermore, the photographs were used as a visual medium to elicit conversation, dialogue and connection.

So, although a new materialist perspective is identified as a key part of the meta-theoretical framework underlying this research, this research does not explicitly employ a new materialist methodology. I do believe this research can be framed as being inspired by new materialist ontology with traces of new materialist methodology. Doing so might contribute to fruitful discussion within the social sciences relating to the promise and feasibility of transdisciplinary research, as new materialist methodology ideally involves mixed methods as well as epistemological and ontological fluidity when it comes to the nature and role of matter in phenomena/experiences.

By focusing on the lived experience of community members, including accounts of their background, the influence of culture, gender and possible experience of oppression while at the same time considering the role of place and matter in these experiences, this research combines phenomenological ethnography with place based research.

Epistemological foundation: phenomenological ethnography

The methodology and approach of this research are grounded in ethnography, inspired by the principles of sensory ethnography (Pink, 2013), place-based research, phenomenology and new materialism, as discussed above.

Ethnography is a methodological approach that includes any or all of the following elements:

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> *"gaining access, recruitment of participants, establishing an insider role and gaining an insider (emic) perspective, deciding the extent to which to be overt or covert, building rapport, using gatekeepers, key informants, or research assistants, getting out, retaining an objective (etic) perspective, and avoiding going 'native'"* (O'Reilly, 2012: 3).

Ethnography uses, or draws from, a variety of methods including participation, observation, document collection, group and individual interviews, asking questions, using visual tools including photographs, audio or film and in some cases survey research. All these methods involve direct and sustained contact with people in their daily environment and culture. The methods are based on observing what happens, listening to what is said and actively asking questions. Understanding and representing the human experience is the central focus of analysis, following phenomenological research, and methods result in written accounts that respect the irreducibility of these human experience (Willis & Trondman, 2000) as well as acknowledge the role of theory and the researchers' own reflexivity (O'Reilly, 2012).

A new materialist/ place-based ontology asks for an ethnography that specifically acknowledges the intra-actions between humans as well as between humans and nonhuman agents, including matter. This also implies considering the materiality of the human, i.e. the physical body. Eliciting how these intra-actions are experienced requires eliciting not just thoughts but also physical sensations, emotions, potential accounts of nonhuman agency or more-than-human agency, physical changes (in bodies, beings, places, matter). This research therefor focuses on the sensory character of ethnography, specifically acknowledged in a sensory ethnographic approach developed by Pink (2013). A specific focus on the sensory elements in ethnographic research makes explicit how more than just visual and linguistic capacities are used when doing ethnographic research, both in researcher and 'participants' (Pink, 2013). It focuses on including other, more embodied, intuitive and emotional knowledge to be included as data in research as well. Specific methods may include ethnographies in movement, in dance, sound recording, audio-visual media, apprenticeship relations but also through interviews in which the researcher may explicitly probe after feelings and emotions, sensory experiences and other kind of emotional or intuitive experiences. Examples ethnographies with a specific sensory and/or place-based character include:
- Researching compassion with the use of photographic methods (Madden et al., 2013)
- Studying the relationship between place and health (Sunderland et al., 2012). This study aimed to include how previously ignored or 'invisible' sensory experiences shape local health and wellbeing by exploring the 'daily lived experience in social determinants of health in place' using a sensory ethnographic approach.

- Another study (Dennis et al., 2009) used Participatory Photo Mapping (PPM) combined with narrative interviewing to study the relationship between health and place, specifically with young people.

By placing participants' experiences as the central focus of analysis (SLE), this research combines ethnography with a phenomenological approach. As Maggs-Rapport (2000) argues, ethnography and interpretative phenomenology can be fruitfully combined:

> "If ethnography and interpretive phenomenology are successfully combined, the phenomenological perspective enables the researcher to concentrate on the phenomenon under review whilst the ethnographic perspective allows for the phenomenon to be considered in terms of the participant group and its cultural background." (Maggs-Rapport 2000: 222)

A phenomenological perspective aims to uncover the meaning underlying an experience which is concealed in the words of participants' narratives (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). An ethnographic approach focuses on individual or shared views and values of a particular culture (ibid). Both perspectives thus look for meaning in a narrative yet with a different focus. In phenomenological research the researcher is understood to be the interpreter of data (ibid). Meaning in this approach is what the researcher understands it to be. An ethnographic approach understands meaning to be cultural (ibid), and explores how culture underlies participants' daily lived experience. In so doing, an ethnographic approach thus often pays more attention to the influence of structures and cultural discourses on lived experience and how experiences are described by participants. Through interviews, ethnographic research aims to unravel how people account for their day-to-day situations (ibid). By combining this with other methods like participant observation, the ethnographer aims to see if what is being said is also reflected in behaviour. When it comes to analysing the data, a phenomenological approach aims to keep to participants' narratives as much as possible, where the researcher points out how their understanding of the experience has been confirmed or negated by participants' words, thereby mostly leaving the description of experiences to the participants themselves (Maggs-Rapport 2000). The ethnographic researcher focuses more on finding commonalities and themes, thereby categorizing data (ibid).

Throughout the research process I have tried to ensure that all those participating in this research were invited in a calm and pleasant space that invited everyone to take their time to listen to one another. Participants were given time and attention and I granted myself as researcher plenty of time for contemplation and reflection. This resulted in research that is going deep rather than wide, in order to really get an understanding of someone's story and understand significant life experiences in their full context. Furthermore, I considered

building a relationship with the communities and its members, connecting and learning from each other a valuable process in and of itself. This research process was thus also a practice of compassionate listening as well as a learning process for myself as researcher.

Axiology: methods

Fieldwork and participating communities

SKEY, the Finnish ecovillage network, has been an official partner in the SUSPLACE project from the start and initially helped me to get access to communities in Finland. Two contact persons within SKEY initially introduced me into the network and provided relevant information on Finnish ecovillages that are member of their network. I have not however initiated all contact through them and made all visits except for the first one by myself. This has been a deliberate decision, as I did not want to be solely associated with the GEN Finland board.

Based on exploratory visits (see table 1), I selected two of the three participating communities, Väinölä and Kurjen Tila, both in Finland. The third participating community, Tamera, was selected without an initial exploratory visit. It was included in the research for a number of reasons. First of all, as this research was a collaboration between LUKE in Finland and the University of Aveiro in Portugal, where the latter was also interested to learn more about the developments of this kind in the context of Portugal. Secondly, both Finnish communities were relatively small (<40 permanent inhabitants). The scope of Tamera (>150 permanent inhabits plus 100-200 visitors each summer) is significantly bigger, which gives the community a different character. Furthermore, the community of Tamera has a strong vision which emphasizes the necessity of integrating inner and social work into community structures as well as a clear mission to heal the relationship between people and the more-than-human world. Via Elisabete Figueiredo, a professor at the University of Aveiro and partner in SUSPLACE Marie Curie ITN, co-supervising this thesis, I was able to get in touch with someone working at Tamera, which provided me with the first point for access.

Selection of the case studies was thus based on a few factors:
- The level of openness and enthusiasm I sensed in communities with regards to collaborating with me as a researcher
- The level of comfortableness I experienced myself while being in different communities. This is important I believe with regards to the type of research I have conducted for which the quality of the relationship between me and the community has been important in gathering useful, in depth insights on sometimes sensitive topics. Furthermore, a specific factor concerned my experience of personal safety in a

Table 1. Overview of fieldwork

Date/period	Visit	Intention of visit
Exploring ecovillages to prepare for fieldwork, identify topics for research & write research proposal (April – December 2016)		
May 2016	SKEY (Finnish ecovillage network) spring meeting at Ihala	Getting acquainted with the Finnish ecovillage network, introducing the research, meeting people from different communities that might have interest in participating in the research
2016 (June – November)	Exploratory visits to Baltic region ecovillages. Finland: Keuruu, Livonsaari, Katajamäki, Gaia, Kurjen Tila and Väinölä Estonia: Lillerou and Small Foot Print Sweden (Gotland): Suderbyn	• get acquainted with different communities and explore possibilities for future fieldwork • introduce the preliminary research ideas, reflect and discuss upon these with community members • become aware of the nature of the communities, the issues they face and the potential interesting aspects of particular types of communities for this research. • Reflect upon research proposal
July 2016	GEN European conference, Arterra Bizimodu, Spain	Experiencing the 'feel' of the ecovillage community, identifying possible research topics
Fieldwork		
Jan – Aug 2017 Several shorter (a few days) and longer visits (2-3 weeks)	Kurjen Tila	• getting to know each other, discussing how to organize the interviews and photovoice sessions, explaining and presenting the research in community meetings • conducted the life-story interviews • organizing and doing the photovoice sessions • participating in day-to-day life: volunteer farm work, community meals, evening gatherings, sauna, 'talkoot'[1] and a midsummer celebration.
Jan – Aug 2017 Several shorter (a few days) and longer visits (2-3 weeks)	Väinölä	• getting to know each other, discussing how to organize the interviews and photovoice sessions, explaining and presenting the research in community meetings • conducted the life-story interviews • organizing and doing the photovoice sessions • participating in day-to-day life: gardening, joining evening readings, community meals, sauna • summer theatre show • community visit to high school in Helsinki
2016	Tamera	• online course on Tamera's vision, 'Global Revolution and the Healing of Love'. included reading the same titled book by Dieter Duhm (2015), one of the founders of the community.
September 2017		• participating in three courses: introduction course, the horse course, the Sacred Matrix seminar • getting acquainted with community members to organize life-story interviews
May 2018		• conducting life-story interviews

1   Finnish term referring to doing voluntary work together

Figure 3. Description of the three participating communities

'**Väinölä**', a theosophical inspired community in central Finland was founded in 1978. It has a little over 30 members are mostly 50+, with some exceptions. There are no children currently living there, the community has a shared economy and everyone lives in the same building, sharing all meals and living spaces together except for a single individual room per inhabitant. The community has voluntary common economy. The majority of the members earn money outside of the community, while others perform 'unpaid' work in the community taking care of the household, gardening, arts, maintenance and so forth. Väinölä is strongly rooted in theosophical philosophy, specifically the idea of brotherhood and an unarmed Finland. There is a reading circle every evening where theosophical texts are read and discussed. Väinölä organizes theosophical summer schools as well as a yearly summer theatre show, created, directed and performed by its members. Art and music have a central role in the community. http://www.ihmisyydentunnustajat.fi/en/

Kurjen Tila (currently Kurki Ecovillage) is a relatively new community in central, rural Finland existing of mostly families, some of which have children. At the time of this research the community was centred around a biodynamic farm (which has now transitioned into a permaculture farm/ecovillage). Families live in separate houses, most of them new houses that have been ecologically built by themselves. They are both open to and in interaction with the 'outside' world. They have around … permanent members and yearly long-term visitors from the European Voluntary Service. Permanent inhabitants are all Finnish, while their volunteers come from all over Europe. At the time of research, Kurjen Tila was exploring the possibilities for offering Green Care services to disabled people. The initial community was found by a group of women that connected through a local, organic food scheme. At the time of research, the community was trying to make sense of a recent conflict situation, which eventually resulted in a phase of transition and changes in the community. https://kurkiecovillage.fi/en

Tamera, is one of the biggest communities in Europe and one of the pioneers. It has an influential and inspirational role in the European and Global Ecovillage Network. The initial community was found in 1978 in Germany. In 1995 a group of people from this initial community created a new community on 140 acres of land in the rural Portuguese Alentejo. At the moment Tamera has around 200 permanent inhabitants and receives visitors yearly during visitor season (April – October). Visitor either stay as long-term volunteers or follow one of Tamera's many educational courses. Tamera carries a strong vision which focuses on healing in the area of love and sexuality in order for global peace to be possible. Furthermore, they are working on accessible renewable (solar) energy technology, water retention landscapes, permaculture and peaceful co-operation between the human and nonhuman world. In Tamera, the relationship between the personal and the political is strongly present, and through their inner, social, environmental, educational and political work they aim to offer a model for communities all over the world. https://tamera.org

community, which is a factor related to gender, personality and personal history of the researcher. Factors influencing my personal sense of safety included access to a clean and private place to sleep, absence of violent conflict, alcohol abuse, trustworthiness of community members in terms of appointments and communication, basic needs met (food, water etc), general cleanliness of community spaces and a respectful attitude towards me. Of course, this also applied the other way around, I remember one community visited in my initial exploratory round of visits that was a bit hesitant and suspicious due to my affiliation with the Natural Resources Institute Finland, being a government institution. The reason for this suspicion involved a general mistrust with the government and specifically an issue involving land access/land rights.

- The level of interaction of a community with their environment to avoid selecting communities that function mostly as isolated islands and might thus have been less interesting for researching the relationship between transformative and transgressive learning
- The characteristics of the communities in terms of size, scope, practices and underlying visions in order to have a diverse set of case studies.

Due to the diverse nature of the communities, they were not selected to give an impression of the average ecovillage. This would do un-justice to the value of their uniqueness and the diverse types of communities and was not needed to answer the type of questions this research addresses. Case studies are selected based on the potential to derive valuable insights on the relationship between, and importance of, transformative learning for societal transformation.

Data (co-) creation
Creating a framework for analysis
This research started with a literature review to review the concept of transformative learning, its origin, its uses, points of critique and different perspectives. This body of literature was evaluated critically to identify which developments and perspectives were considered valuable and useful and which were considered outdated, incomplete, unsuitable or not aligned to the values and normative assumptions underlying this research.

This was used to create the basis for a theoretical framework of a place-based approach to transformative learning, which as such did not exist yet.

Life story interviews
The life-story interview is widely used in qualitative research as a holistic methodological approach to bring out the voice of research participants within a 'life-as-a-whole' (Atkinson, 1998) context. Life-story research is about appreciating the *lived experience* of individuals while recognizing that describing this experience is an act of narrative interpretation (Atkinson in Clandinin, 2007: 230) involving meaning making of lives experiences through story-telling.

Life-story interviews aim at shedding light on an individual life, constructed and reconstructed through representing that life as a story, within its larger context. The approach of the life-story interview, as Atkinson (1998) describes, is based upon a deep respect for the storytellers and the subjective meaning carried within their stories. Life-story interviews aim at the most equitable interpersonal exchange possible within a research setting and offer a medium for the researcher to step inside the personal world of the storyteller. Life-story interviews are characterized by mutuality and the inherent interactional nature of sharing personal stories. This asks of a researcher a high level of self-reflection and sensitivity towards their research participants and the underlying research agenda.

According to Atkinson (1998), life-story interviews offer great benefits to the interviewees as well, simply by being offered a space where someone listens to and guides them through

the telling of their life story. When it comes to the ethical considerations of asking people for their time this might be good to consider.

Some uses of life-story research are of particular relevance to this research. In sociology, life stories have been used to understand a social reality that is described by a story and exists outside of it, to define relationships and roles in a community, to explain an individual's understanding of social events as well as to invite stories rather than reports during interviews (Atkinson 1998). A particular aim of sociological research has often been to tell the stories of individuals from underrepresented groups, be it in terms of gender or culturally marginalized cultures. Life-story research is also used to study religious or spiritual experiences in portraying religion and spirituality as lived experience. Life-stories can answer questions including 'what beliefs, or worldviews, are expressed in the story?', 'is the transcendent expressed?' and what role, if any, has a spiritual community played in the story (Comstock, 1995). In philosophical research life-story interview is useful to explore how people make sense of the world and how they decide how life is to be lived, which closely resonates to the aim of this research focusing on how shifts in consciousness relate to more sustainable lifestyles. Personal stories can reveal how subjective accounts of one's life often contain a personal worldview, a personal philosophy, a personal value system, a personal ideology, and a view of what is morally or politically correct (Holstein et al., 2012).

The life story interviews in this research

Nineteen life-story interviews were conducted with participants from the three communities, general characteristics of the interviewees can be found in table 3.

These interviews were recorded, transcribed and uploaded to an online data analysis software platform (DEDOOSE[2]). Sampling of participants was done in a pragmatic manner. As the interviews required quite some time and willingness to speak openly about rather personal matters, a more structured selection procedure was not deemed suitable, even though there was a general aim to keep a balance between young and older participants, male and female and, when applicable, different nationalities. Some participants were personally approached by the main researcher or by the contact person in the community, while others subscribed to a list after an invitation email and introductory meeting.

The interviews had the form of dialogues between researcher and participant. They were unstructured, although some guiding topics were used to start the conversation. Themes that were discussed during these interviews included participants general feelings

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2   https://www.dedoose.com/

Table 2. Characteristics of interviewees

Community	Age at the time of interview (2017–2018)	Gender	Country of birth
Kurjen Tila	30-40	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	60-70	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	50-60	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	50-60	M	Belgium
Kurjen Tila	30-40	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	40-50	M	Finland
Kurjen Tila	30-40	M	Italy
Kurjen Tila	20-30	M	Italy
Väinölä	50-60	F	Finland
Väinölä	60-70	M	Finland
Väinölä	30-40	F	Finland
Väinölä	50-60	M	Finland
Väinölä	40-50	F	Finland
Väinölä	40-50 (guess)	F	Finland
Tamera	25-35 (guess)	F	Finland
Tamera	40-50	F	Palestina
Tamera	40-50	M	Zambia
Tamera	50-60	F	Portugal
Tamera	40-50	M	USA
Tamera	50-60	F	Germany

about the community project, the experience of the first period in community, difficult moments, decisive moments leading to their commitment to stay, and lessons learned during their time in community. Once participants started talking, I, when needed, asked for clarification of, or elaboration on, experiences that seemed potentially interesting.

Participatory photographic methods/ Photovoice
The use of photographs in qualitative research methods has been found useful in community research (photovoice) as well as research eliciting tacit and sometimes intangible themes like compassion, a central theme in this research since the very beginning and one of the three themes in the initial theoretical framework. Photographic methods are, according to Madden et al. (2013) based on Warren (2002) an appropriate way to research a topic like compassion, which was one of the first and central themes of the initial theoretical framework. By using photographs as the central focus in

interviews, Warren (2002, 2012) explored aspects of life like emotions within a particular organization that would have been difficult to capture with classic methods that use merely written or spoken language. Photographs allow eliciting the "*tacit, intangible and largely ineffable nature*" (Warren, 2002: 242) in order to explore what it feels like to, in this case, work in a certain organization. Photographic research has been shown to allow research participants to provide key insights into their lines of thought, their organization and how they experience absence (Lilius et al., 2008) or presence (Dutton et al., 2002; Kanov et al., 2004) of compassion in their daily lives. Photo elicitation can generate deeper insights in compassion research as merely asking direct questions about a potential sensitive, painful and personal issue. Direct questions about the presence of absence of compassion can be difficult and might not always evoke insightful responses in participants (Frost et al., 2000; Lilius et al., 2011; Madden et al., 2013). There are also quantitative methods to measure compassion (Pommier, 2010) and self-compassion (Neff, 2003), they were however deemed less appropriate in this research because of their non-participatory nature and the indication of eco-villagers during preliminary field visits of 'being tired of questionnaires' (Field visit Suderbyn (Gotland, Sweden), 11-19 November 2016).

Photovoice as a type of participatory photographic method, is often used in community research (Hergenrather et al., 2009) and participatory action research (Axinte, 2022). Photovoice generally has three main goals: (1) enabling people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) invite critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large and small group discussion of the photographs, and (3) enabling communities to reach policymakers (Wang, 1999). This research focused on the first two goals. Photovoice allows for harnessing 'participant reflexivity' (Yang, 2015), or as Mankowski & Rappaport (2000) describe it, inviting people to make pictures and tell the story of the picture allows for an 'evaluative element' in the research as "*stories are about something that the storyteller cares about" (p.481)*. If participants are given the space to decide what they would like to tell to each other and/or the researcher, they are given power to decide what topics are important to talk about. Photographs were used in this research as the means to elicit participants stories which included the meanings behind the photographs they took and beyond. The photographs were not coded separately from the stories that were elicited in focus group discussions, as photographs are deemed meaningless without participants voices (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice was used in two of the three communities, Väinölä and Kurjen Tila. Conducting photovoice sessions in Tamera was not possible due to limitations set by the community based on their lack of capacity to enable and participate in photovoice. Tamera opens up to visitors several months a year during which the community is occupied with running courses and hosting visitors. The rest of year is reserved for

internal community life and work. Due to this, fieldwork was limited to participating in courses and conducting life-story interviews.

In Väinölä and Kurjen Tila participants, some of which were also interviewed for the life-story interviews, were asked to take photographs guided by five probes: 1) a meaningful moment, 2) a difficult moment, 3) something that you are proud of, 4) a favourite place and 5) the purpose of your life in your community. Participants did not have to take pictures for all the prompts, they were merely there to guide them. The photographs were sent to the main researcher, who collected them all and organized focus group discussion in which the pictures were discussed in a group setting. In total five focus groups were organized, two groups of four participants each in Väinölä and four in Kurjen Tila of which two with permanent inhabitants (three and five participants respectively), one with the group of European Volunteers (six participants) of that year and one private session with a couple. Table 3 provides the general characteristics of the participants. The ones that are highlighted were also interviewed for the life-story interviews, the others only joined for photovoice.

The aim of the group sessions was to elicit the stories behind the pictures as well as creating a space in which the small group of community members could take conscious time to listen to each other's' stories, hear what others appreciate about the community as well as their difficult and challenging moments. The aim of these sessions thus went beyond eliciting the individual stories to inviting a dialogue between community members, to make sense of the pictures together. It could be the case that one picture evoked responses in more community members, finding each other in a shared meaning or entering in a dialogue over different, complementary or sometimes conflicting meanings.

The sessions started with a check in where everyone was asked to pick a visual image lying on the table, e.g. card and using that image to express how one is doing at the moment. Participants were then asked to break up in pairs and share their pictures and the meaning behind them with each other. One person listened and wrote down key words or sentences on post-it's while the other talked and vice versa. I myself walked around, kept track of the time and listened to some of the stories. The session then continued in the plenary where a selection of pictures was discussed, at least two from each participant (time wise it was not possible to discuss all pictures in plenary, I thus in the end acquired extensive descriptions of some pictures, and only key words or sentences of some others). The meaning of the picture was presented to the group not by the one who took it but by the one who listened to the story behind it. Then, it was complemented or clarified by the person who took the picture. Sometimes the researcher gave some probes, or asked clarifying questions. After this there was space for anyone in the group to comment or ask questions.

Table 3. Characteristics of photo-voice participants

Community	Age at the time (2017–2018)	Gender	Country of birth
Kurjen Tila	50-60	M	Belgium
Kurjen Tila	50-60	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	20-30	M	France
Kurjen Tila	20-30	F	France
Kurjen Tila	20-30	M	Spain
Kurjen Tila	15-25	F	Hungary
Kurjen Tila	20-30	F	Portugal
Kurjen Tila	20-30	M	Italy
Kurjen Tila	30-40	M	Finland
Kurjen Tila	50-60	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	30-40	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	60-70	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	50-60	F	Finland
Kurjen Tila	30-40	M	Italy
Kurjen Tila	40-50	M	Finland
Kurjen Tila	40-50	M	Finland
Väinölä	30-40	M	Finland
Väinölä	30-40	F	Finland
Väinölä	40-50	F	Finland
Väinölä	50-60	F	Finland
Väinölä	50-60	M	Finland
Väinölä	50-60	F	Finland
Väinölä	50-60	F	Finland
Väinölä	50-60	F	Finland

= *this participant was also interviewed for the life-story interviews*

The post-it's with the key words and sentences were handed to the main researcher. The plenary discussions were recorded. Recordings were transcribed and together with the notes uploaded on DEDOOSE. These transcripts were analysed similarly to the life-story interview transcripts, as can be read in the following section.

Retrospective auto-ethnography through memories and fieldnotes
Apart from creating data based on the experiences of community members, I have also looked at experiences from my own life, prior to and during this research, that relate to the themes discussed in this research. I have felt that some of my personal experiences prior to and during the research have influenced the direction I have taken

in this research, theoretically as well as empirically. Furthermore, significant experiences during the research have strengthened me personally and, potentially also as researcher. Through a retrospective auto-ethnographic account I have attempted to gain a better understanding of how these experiences from before and during the research have influenced me as a person and as a researcher. For this purpose, this thesis includes an autoethnographic chapter that reflects, retrospectively, on the learning process of me as a researcher. Autoethnography is understood as a mix of presenting "*research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political*" (Ellis 2004: xix). The style used for this research reflects analytic autoethnography, which intends to gain a cultural understanding of self that is intimately related to others in society (Holstein, Marvasti, and Mckinney 2021). It aims to go beyond sharing autobiographical fieldnotes to providing an interpretation and analysis of them in relation to the theoretical development process and empirical research throughout this thesis.

A secondary purpose of the auto-ethnographic chapter has been to simply share my personal learning experiences during the years I researched transformative learning in ecovillages.

Interpretative analysis: Narrative analysis and Significant life experiences
Narrative analysis was the basis of all methodological approaches used for this thesis: life-story interviews, photo-voice and autoethnography. Narrative inquiry is about creating 'data' through letting participants narrate about real life experiences in an intimate, relational manner, which allows for exploring specific topics within a controlled yet authentic setting (Gay et al., 2009). Narratives are accounts of subjective personal experience, where the teller gives his/her point of view toward what happened and points out what he/she considers significant (Smith, 2000). Narrative analysis has been used to look at significant turning points in the course of people's lives and how people make meaning of such transitions, (McAdams et al., 2001; McLean & Pratt, 2006), the meaning of peak-experiences in youth in the process of personality development (Hoffman & Muramoto, 2007), and lastly narrative analysis was used to explore the role of sense of place in navigating a transition process after a traumatic life event (Crossley, 2001).

A thematic approach was used (Riessman, 2002) thus mainly focusing on the content of what had been told. Specifically, I identified 'nuclear episodes' (Singer & Salovey, 1993), otherwise known as 'significant life experiences (SLE's)': memories that play a consciousness role in determining individuals' life choices and goals. SLE was introduced by Tanner (1980) who reasoned that if educators better understood the kind of experiences that motivate responsible environmental behaviour, they would be better able to foster

environmental consciousness and practices within the citizenry. Studies on SLE's involved 'single interest samples': environmental educators or members or staff of wildlife or wilderness preservation organizations.

SLE research has been criticized for its dependence on memories, which, according to some critics, is not a reliable source of information (Dillon et al., 2006; Gough, 1999). Others however argue that although memories often confuse precise details, they do tend to be reliable when it comes to the general course of events. They are more likely to be reliable under conditions of free recall, as the life-story interviews in this research are based on (Chawla, 1998). As this research is not concerned with hard facts that are objectively considered to be true, but rather people's own account of their experiences, memories are considered valuable sources of information. As Chawla (2001: 457) argues, "*people's own constructions of their past point us to forms of experience that we should take seriously*". Furthermore, Howell and Allen (2016) rightly state that rejecting all data based on memories leaves social research with few other options.

SLE research is often quantitative (e.g. Howell & Allen 2016), looking for single cause effects of specific values, motivations and experiences instead of creating a relational understanding. Although Howell and Allen (2016) for example do acknowledge in their discussion that based on their qualitative and quantitative analysis it seems that *"biospheric and altruistic values, motives, and worldviews tend to be intertwined rather than distinct"(p.826),* understanding this would require, as they say, more in-depth interviews. Furthermore, they speculate that "*engaging with climate change for altruistic reasons (social justice concerns) leads to a more eco-centric worldview and intrinsic valuation of nature, without changing the fundamental, (social justice oriented) motivation for action*" *(p. 826)*, hinting again at the relational character of different types of motivations and values. Furthermore, Howell & Allen (2016) acknowledge that SLE research might unconsciously disregard the effect of 'continuity of experience' by its focus on specific events, specifically because the concept 'significant experience' is actually used in questionnaires and interviews with participants. I tried to avoid this by not specifying to interviewees that I was specifically looking for significant experiences but instead inviting them to tell the story of their life in an organic matter.

To code and categorize the SLE's, the concepts from the continuously evolving theoretical framework were used. These theoretical concepts were used as initial main codes after which additional codes and sub-codes emerged from the data. Based on the new set of codes and sub-codes after each round of analysis, the theoretical framework was re-assessed and modified. The first type of data collected were the life-story interviews.

Coding of the interviews involved several rounds:
- The three themes and subthemes of the first version of the theoretical framework (see chapter 4) were used as starting point for formulating codes. As the interview material provided richer and more specific experiences that could not be fully captured by the sub-themes of the framework, more codes, and sub-codes were formulated.
- Once a new code was created, all interviews analysed before were scanned again for excerpts that fitted the new sub-code
- Once all interviews were coded, all codes created were retrieved and re-grouped, re-formulated, merged or split. Furthermore, code charts were retrieved from DEDOOSE that indicated the occurrence of codes to identify whether certain themes emerged as specifically relevant.
- The list of codes and sub-codes then was again laid next to the themes and sub-themes of the theoretical framework to see which codes fitted under what theme, which codes asked for new (sub) themes and which sub-themes were not reflected back in the codes that emerged from the analysis.
- Preliminary findings were shared with the supervisors and fellow researchers who provided critical feedback, pointing out, amongst other things, different perspectives and other angles from which the results could be interpreted. This resulted in another round of analyses in which it was critically assessed whether initial codes reflected also these other perspectives, whether certain themes were overlooked in coding (which involved going back to the interviews and created some more codes).

Based on the analysis of the life-story interviews, the theoretical framework was re-assessed and modified as the initial framework could not account for all types of SLE's that emerged from the data (see chapter 5). A slightly adapted version of the new four-dimensional framework was hence used as starting point for the analysis for the paper presented in chapter 6, in which the photovoice session were included as data as well. Analysing the transcripts of the photovoice sessions and the field notes and memories used for the autoethnographic chapter was done in a similar matter as the life-story interviews, albeit starting off with a much more extensive coding scheme. The complete coding scheme and general framework for the life-story interviews and photovoice group sessions can be found in the Appendix.

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Chapter 4

Place-based transformative learning: a framework to explore consciousness in sustainability initiatives.

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Introduction

Behaviour change stemming from regulations, incentives and/or anxiety is often temporary. In other words, people are likely to revert to old habits (Maiteny, 2000). For change to be enduring and transformative, it needs to come from the inside out (O'Brien, 2013). This requires emotional engagement and meaningful experiences that help individuals make sense of change and consider new possibilities (Maiteny, 2002). Since the 1970s, environmental sociologists have argued for a new paradigm in which humans are understood as ecologically interdependent with other species; scholars have cautioned against ongoing development and consumption that negatively affected the earth (Dunlap & Catton, 1980). The deep ecology and ecofeminist movements have taken a step further by arguing that we need a complete shift in our way of being in the world, a shift towards a deep ecological consciousness (e.g. Macy, 1998).

Sustainability and place-based research increasingly recognizes this 'inner dimension of sustainability', or a shift from the inside out (Horlings, 2015). Current studies of the inner dimension of sustain- ability in place-based research explore the role of values (Horlings, 2015a), culture (Dessein et al., 2015) and worldviews (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013; Horlings, 2016). However, this body of research falls short of exploring the dimension of consciousness. This paper argues that we need to better understand the role of consciousness in sustainability transformations. It seeks to expand understandings of how inner consciousness shapes sustainability and place-shaping processes. It suggests a place-based approach to transformative learning (TL) as a theoretical lens to research this dimension of consciousness.

This paper understands consciousness as the embodiment and experience of our values, culture and worldview: going beyond a cognitive understanding of the world to actually sensing it in our bones (Daloz, 2004). The paper departs from the idea that a consciousness of interdependence, or an 'ecological consciousness', complements radical long-term societal transformation.

Some researchers suggest that such a shift towards an ecological consciousness should not be viewed as a sacrifice. In contrast, this paper understands processes of sustainability transformation as invitations to rethink who we are as human beings and how we want to shape our lives and environments, learning along the way that our wellbeing does not depend on a consumerist, exploitative lifestyle (Belton, 2014). Newman (2014) argues that the creation of consciousness is a continuous and relational process that unfolds in the interaction between the self, the social and the material. O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004: 2) suggest that shifting towards an ecological consciousness is a process that requires an engagement with practices that embody ecological values. Based on these

insights, we argue that TL should be understood as a place-based phenomenon. TL scholars increasingly recognise that there is a need for a well-grounded, contextualised and localised approach to TL. Despite this realisation, there is as yet no well-developed place-based perspective on TL. At the same time, sustainability science increasingly understands sustainability as a place-based phenomenon grounded in people-place relationships (e.g. Calvo and De Rosa, 2017; Roep et al., 2015). The building blocks this paper will develop are intended to explore place-based sustainability initiatives. As a working definition, a sustainability initiative here refers to citizen initiatives intended to conserve, transform or regenerate people-place relation- ships, embodying and materialising sustainability's meaning for them. The term 'sustainability' for us refers to a process that ideally leads to a world in which individuals, communities, villages, cities, regions, countries and so on embody diverse regenerative ways of living on this planet that build on the premises of cooperation, diversity, abundance, and health and wellbeing. All of these require a holistic understanding that includes both human and nonhuman entities and actors. We understand sustainability to be place-based because the way in which this broad vision manifests itself will differ in different places as a shared interpretation among all actors involved in a specific context, emerging from participatory processes envisioning and experimenting with desired futures (Miller, 2013; Weaver and Rotmans, 2006).

Researching the inner dimension of sustainability, especially when going to the level of consciousness, requires a stretching of modern scientific epistemological and ontological boundaries (e.g. Harmin et al., 2017; Lange, 2012b). The paper builds on the work of the scholars (Gunnlaugson, 2005; Lange, 2012b; Tisdell, 2012) who recognise this and point to the valuable contributions of research on the topics of consciousness, spirituality, neuroscience and complexity theory to the field of TL (e.g. the work of Schlitz et al., 2010; Wilber, 2007). They argue that scholars need to engage more with these relatively unfamiliar fields to better understand the depths of human experience and the potential for transformation. This paper therefore builds on the premises of a relational ontology (Lange, 2012a) and an epistemology that includes multiple knowledges and embraces a holistic and integrated approach to TL.

The paper thus aims to enrich the sustainability sciences first of all by contributing to a vision of sustainability that recognises the interrelated nature of our psychological and emotional wellbeing, and the state of our social and physical environment. It also aims to support the case for rethinking modern scientific epistemology and ontology in researching sustainability. Furthermore it hopes to contribute to the ongoing theoretical development of the concept of TL in sustainability contexts through the development of a place-based approach. Last but not least, it offers a tool that can be used (and needs to be tested) empirically to explore the dimension of consciousness in (place-based) sustainability transformations.

Consciousness and the inner dimension of sustainability in place-based research

Environmental sociologists have long argued for a paradigm shift to make change towards a sustainable world possible. For example, Dunlap and Catton, 1980 argued that humans, instead of dominating nature, needed to start understanding themselves as part of the larger earth ecosystem. Place-based sustainability research shows that either a shift in culture is indeed needed to accommodate change or sustainable change needs to be aligned with existing culture (Dessein et al., 2015). These two processes are often interlinked and mutually reinforce each other, because the social and material dimensions in a place are inherently interconnected (Jones and Evans, 2012). This 'inner dimension' in place-based sustainability research is largely captured by the concepts of values, culture and worldview. Human values are generally defined as the principles and motivational goals which guide decisions and behaviour, and transcend specific situations. Values in place-based research are understood as geographically bounded and shaped in the interaction of individuals, groups and their environment – and therefore as relational (Brown, 1984; Horlings, 2016). Values are therefore context- and culture-dependent, and connected with our worldview (Horlings, 2016). Hedlund-de Witt (2013: 156) describes worldviews as 'inescapable' systems of meaning and meaning making' that in effect largely inform how humans 'interpret, enact and co-create reality'.

Building on Brown (1984), Schroeder (2013) emphasises the importance of considering the relational or 'felt' dimension of values. This felt dimension is the unobservable and implicit process in the creation of values. It is an affective and experiential dimension, a process that involves people's subjective feelings of preference in a specific context. It is present in the direct interaction between people and their environment. Held values, on the other hand, are more established generalised concepts about what is good and desirable. In mutual inter- action, held and felt values constitute explicitly assigned values. By exploring the nature of awareness and the creation of consciousness in people-place interfaces, this paper provides a framework for engaging with this dimension of felt values, as well as a better understanding of its role in transformative change.

It has been argued that a transformation in our consciousness towards an 'ecological consciousness' is required to underline change towards a more sustainable world (e.g. Devall and Sessions, 1985; O'Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). An ecological consciousness is about becoming more sensitive to our own life and the human and nonhuman life around us (Daloz, 2004). It involves experiencing all life as inter- connected, without illusions of dominance in the areas of human/ nonhuman life, gender, wealth and culture (Devall and Sessions, 1985: 64–65). A shift in consciousness is not merely an epistemological pro- cess of learning to think differently (Jackson, 2008) that shifts our mental ideas about the world and our place within it. It also involves learning to feel and be differently, an

ontological process that shifts both how we experience and are sensitive to our own lives and the sur- rounding world (Daloz, 2004; Lange, 2004). This is where the dimension of consciousness complements the concepts of value, culture and worldview which still often reside in the mental sphere. For example, we can be taught to value a tree and cognitively understand that our lives are connected with its life. However, if we do not experience, feel or sense this connection 'in our bones' (Daloz, 2004: 31), we do not fully embody interdependence and are very likely to find it difficult always to act accordingly (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Studies exploring the human connection with nature and indigenous ecological knowledge, for example, occasionally consider the dimension of consciousness (Hall et al., 2000; Kamitsis and Francis, 2013; Zylstra et al., 2014).

This paper argues that TL – the shift towards an ecological consciousness – is an inherently place-based phenomenon. The next section first explores the theory's origin, meaning and different uses. Second, it discusses and critiques various current perspectives on it. Third, it argues for a place-based approach to TL.

Transformative learning: towards a place-based perspective

Challenging dominant assumptions

TL was first coined by Mezirow (1978) and described as 'a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better justified meaning perspectives' (Mezirow, 1978, in Taylor and Cranton). Mezirow's initial theory emerged from a study of middle-aged women returning to college (Mezirow and Marsick, 1978).

TL theory has since developed in various directions in response to both critique and emerging new perspectives (Taylor and Snyder, 2012; Tisdell, 2012). To name only a few, the various perspectives on TL include social emancipatory (Brookfield, 1993), depth psychology (Dirkx, 2001), cultural-spiritual, including feminist (Brooks, 2009), race-centric/non-Western/African (Mejiuni, 2012; Merriam and Gabo, 2008), and integrative (Gunnlaugson, 2005), including the planetary perspective (O'Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). These perspectives cover a broad range of topics and contexts, including environmental education (D'Amato and Krasny, 2011), interreligious dialogue (Charaniya and Walsh, 2004), spirituality (Sefa Dei and George, 2002), grieving (Sands and Tennant, 2010), volunteer tourism (Coghlan and Gooch, 2011), studying abroad (Perry et al., 2012), participatory natural resource management (Diduck et al., 2012), agricultural reform (Duveskog et al., 2011), buying local food (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010) and environmental activism (Daloz, 1997). It is argued that these different perspectives on TL can be placed under the umbrella of a more unified theory, because they all share the same three basic assumptions (Cranton and Taylor, 2012): 1) a constructivist understanding of making

meaning based on experiences; 2) the idea of individual autonomy; and 3) an under-standing of TL as both (not either/or) individual transformation and social change. However, in using the concept of TL to explore consciousness transformation in place-based sustainability initiatives, these assumptions fail to address a number of issues the approach this paper develops seeks to overcome.

First, in researching the inner dimension of sustainability, including humans' connection to nature and shifts in consciousness or worldview, the topics of spirituality and religion cannot be bypassed (Harmin et al., 2017; Hedlund-de Witt, 2011; O'Sullivan, 1999; Zylstra et al., 2014). This requires an openness to non-modern ontologies and multiple forms of knowledge, including indigenous ones (Bowers, 2005; Lange, 2012a). It contradicts the assumption that everything is always socially constructed. In the planetary vision of TL, O'Sullivan (1999) moves beyond constructivism as the sole explanation of social and cultural phenomena by allowing for both universal features, derived from 'all the stories that have been told over the ages, located in an order beyond any of the individual ones' (O'Sullivan, 1999: 183) and local specificities in any given context. This approach to TL may be considered 're- constructive', because it seeks to avoid the limitations of both modern and postmodern approaches (O'Sullivan, 1999; O'Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). It is noteworthy here that Taylor (1998) seems to hold a contradictory view in supporting the assumption that constructivism underlies all TL theories while at the same time suggesting a re-constructive approach in collaboration with O'Sullivan.

The second assumption concerning individual autonomy is based on the idea that critical reflection, a key process in Mezirow's perspective on TL (Mezirow, 2003; Schugurensky, 2002), should ideally result in autonomous responsible thinkers. This assumption fails to recognise: a) that the rational perspective on TL grants too much credit to critical reflection based on rational reasoning and discourse (Taylor, 1998); b) the theory's western bias and flawed assumptions about the possibility of autonomy; and c) the risk of TL theory becoming a theory of 'personal development' in the spirit of a neoliberal culture of self- development and wellbeing (Newman (2014: 347). We suggest that a place- based approach should understand rational reasoning as one of many co-existing intelligences (Gunnlaugson, 2005: 334), thereby respecting place-specific knowledge, including traditional knowledge and indigenous ontology (Lange, 2012a; Smith, 2012). Furthermore, if TL is to transcend its western 'bias', the individual should be understood as embedded in a social context or community, especially when re- searching places that embody more communitarian cultures (Merriam and Gabo, 2008). A focus on the individual and self-development may ultimately come at the price of neglecting or even damaging our commitment to being well together, which contradictorily may lead to more anxiety and depression (Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Grundmann, 2011).

Finally, we doubt the validity of the third assumption, which suggests that TL theory concerns both individual and social change. Mezirow's idea of TL has been criticised for a lack of insight into the link between individual and social change (e.g. Collard and Law, 1989; Hart, 1990). As a result, since 2000, scholars have begun to pay attention to the social and political context of TL processes (e.g. Brookfield, 1993) and have linked it to planetary concerns, spirituality and other sociocultural issues (Newman, 2014). However, the impact of these studies has been marginal, and Newman (2014: 347) concludes that TL is still largely understood as an individual experience, based on recent TL conference proceedings, Mezirow's (2012) insistence on the individual and the continuous dominance of Mezirow's perspective in discussions on TL (see e.g. Taylor and Cranton, 2012). In researching the dimension of consciousness, the interaction between the individual, the social and the material is central. The place-based approach developed in this paper recognises this space of interaction as the basis of TL. The next section elaborates further on this.

TL as a place-based phenomenon

It is generally acknowledged that existing TL theories fail to pay sufficient attention to the contextualised nature of TL processes (Clark and Wilson, 1991; Cranton and Taylor, 2012). Global and unique local influences should be considered (Lange, 2012b; O'Sullivan, 1999). The need for a place-based approach becomes especially apparent in the work of those using TL in relation to sustainability. Lange (2004) shows that grounding people in core values and traditional culture provides the sense of stability needed to be open to and able to cope with change. Several other studies describe the value of (re)-appreciating historical, cultural and traditional connections between communities and natural resources (e.g. Armitage et al., 2008; Bowers, 2005; Sims and Sinclair, 2008). Furthermore, cultivating an awareness of the globalised organisation of our world and our own position in it is shown to be part of the TL process (Gruenewald, 2003; O'Sullivan, 1999). Finally, scholars applying TL in a non-Western context – for example, in an Afrocentric approach – show that TL can only be useful in diverse contexts if local features and culture are carefully considered (Merriam and Gabo, 2008).

However, context in the above examples rarely refers to the material dimension in TL processes. It is usually social, cultural, historical or political (e.g. in Clark and Wilson, 1991). As a result, Bowers (2005) suggests that TL research fails to acknowledge the role shared resources and land play in the lives of indigenous cultures, and the importance of conserving them as the basis of sustainable livelihoods. The place-based approach this paper develops aims to overcome this. A place-based approach recognises that sustainability should be rooted in local resources, capacities and the distinct nature of particular places (Roep et al., 2015). At the same time, caution is required if indigenous and traditional knowledge and culture are not to be romanticised, or the fact that very

few places on Earth have remained completely uninfluenced by western economic and/or cultural globalisation is not to be overlooked (Lange, 2012a). Place-based approaches consider this by appreciating the importance of local social, cultural and institutional characteristics while recognising the global influences which encounter and interact with such place-based specificities (Horlings, 2015b). This paper therefore understands place as encompassing both the material characteristics of geographical regions and the relational nature of places as nodes in a network of social, political, economic, material and historical relations which may reach out in time and space (Paasi, 2009), and in which the local and the global meet (Escobar, 2001; Massey, 2005). In complementing this approach, we aim to honour potential spiritual/metaphysical relations and practices, because these play a key role in shaping impact in many contexts. In non-Western cultures, for example, ancestor relationships may play a vital role in shaping places (e.g. Morphy, 1991). We also seek to specifically ac- knowledge the embodiment of place-shaping relations, including our senses and ability to move (Amann, 2003).

The transformation of consciousness from a place-based perspective is thus derived from the understanding that consciousness concerns the encounter between the self, the social, the material and, perhaps, the metaphysical world. These encounters are mediated by language and our engagements with the social and material dimensions through work (or practices) combined with a process of reflection (Newman, 2014, 352). This aligns with O'Sullivan's and Taylor (2004) planetary vision that learning towards an ecological consciousness requires mindful engagement in practices that embody ecological values such as connection, openness, generosity, appreciation, mutual respect and responsibility, partnership, (collaborative) inquiry, dialogue, communication, reflection, celebration, creativity and a sense of the whole.

The framework this paper develops seeks to explore consciousness transformation in place-based sustainability initiatives. 'Place-based sustainability initiatives' may seem tautologous if we understand that all initiatives always have a material local context and the potential to reach out across time and space. Even virtual practices involve the embodiment of a person in place and the location of technological equipment (Massey, 2005). Furthermore, human experience is inherently situational; humans are because they are embodied in place (Freire, 1970; Gruenewald, 2003). However, by emphasising the 'place- based', we refer to those initiatives that explicitly and intentionally work towards embedding the human in place. Examples of such initiatives may be ecological or intentional communities, urban gardens, green care, neighbourhood initiatives, creative spaces, ecological tourism and sustainable energy initiatives. We recognise that in practice, when referring to a specific sustainability initiative like an ecological community, reference is usually made to a specific, often demarcated, territorial space and the people living within it. Such a territorially demarcated unit may very well be

the starting point for unravelling such a 'place' if followed by an elaborate exploration of the various relationships extending in time and space which make the territorial unit the 'place' it is. This also shows the potential of such a place to trigger change well beyond its territorial boundaries.

In summarising this section, we suggest that TL is a useful concept to explore the dimension of consciousness in sustainability initiatives if it is understood from a place-based perspective. Here, we partly dis- agree with Newman (2012), who argues that the term 'transformative' is too strong, proposing 'good learning' instead. Although we recognise that many studies use the term 'transform' to describe experiences that merely involve some kind of change (Newman, 2012: 37–38), we argue that Newman (2012) fails to recognise that, in the light of current global crises and sustainability challenges, the word transformation is not too strong. The way we live and how our society is organised need a genuine transformation (e.g. O'Brien, 2013a). We agree with Howie and Bagnall (2013) that TL as a theory bears too many inconsistencies, un- addressed flaws and too many overly broad and vague meanings. We therefore treat TL as a useful concept or 'conceptual metaphor' (Howie and Bagnall, 2013) to use in building a theoretical frame. We also suggest 'creativity' as an inherent part of TL, which may partly address Newman (2012) concern that he almost never finds any proof of a TL process outside learners' own accounts.

Building blocks for a place-based approach

This section presents the framework that emerged from a literature review that revealed (aspects of) the place-based nature of a TL process. We have included additional literature to support theoretical thickness and contribute to the extension of TL epistemological and ontological boundaries. We have organised the reviewed literature in three themes that emerged from the literature itself: 'connection', 'compassion' and 'creativity' (See Fig. 4).

(Re-)Connection

This first theme reflects the core of an ecological consciousness – the interconnected nature of all life. Experiencing and acting on this sense of interconnectedness (reflected in the other two themes of compassion and creativity) is the basis of living from an ecological consciousness (Bateson, 1994; O'Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). Learning towards this state involves experiencing a sense of connection with various aspects of life through engagement and practices. The literature reviewed for this theme is literature that uses TL to describe such experiences of (re-) connection.

Following Massey (2004), connection involves the conscious experience of our lives being connected with multiple places in this era of globalisation. Developing such a global consciousness is reflected in TL literature describing a) experiences of encounters with

Connection
- interconnected nature of life
- places near and far
- diversity
- spirituality
- culture
- nonhuman
- inner world
- restoring core values
- bodies, the senses & multiple intelligences

Compassion
- caring for oneself
- mindfulness
- other focused concern, altruism & responding to suffering
- compassion for nature - doing the least harm
- compassionate awareness - holding multiple perspectives & opening up to otherness and diversity

Creativity
- tangible action - explicit form
- being fully human
- from 'having' to 'being'
- embedded in place - through engagement, interaction and practices
- utopianism

Figure 4. Keywords reflecting the content of the three themes.

other places and cultures, including temporary residence abroad for either study (Perry et al., 2012) or (voluntary) work or tourism (Coghlan and Gooch, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009; Morgan, 2010) and b) taking responsibility for lifestyle choices that impact places near and far, reflected in re- search on (food) consumption choices (Kerton and Sinclair, 2010; McDonald et al., 1999; O'Sullivan, 2003). Besides geographic mobility and/or encounters with other cultures, spiritual practice is another way to potentially evoke a sense of connection with all the world's people, perceiving differences as interesting rather than threatening (Chin, 2006; Schlitz et al., 2010; Vieten et al., 2006). Becoming comfortable with and interested in diversity is key to a TL process, because con- structing an understanding of ourselves and our world requires inter-

action and dialogue with 'otherness' (Jokikokko, 2009; O'Sullivan and Taylor, 2004). This research supports the argument that embracing diversity is required if we are to get anywhere close to a complete understanding of our world (Harmon, 2002).

The pledge for responsibility towards places near and far concerns the call to appreciate the local in an increasingly globalised world. This involves rootedness in meaningful values and aspects of traditional culture to either conserve sustainable lifestyles or accommodate and complement transformative change. This is reflected in TL research on traditional ecological knowledge (Feinstein, 2004) and in Bowers' critique of TL, which argues TL favours change over conserving traditional ecological lifestyles (Bowers, 2005; Lange, 2012a). It is also reflected in research exploring the experience of the nonhuman. This

dimension is explored in TL research on outdoor education (D'Amato and Krasny, 2011), bioregional citizenship (Daloz, 2004) and the role of encountering suffering in nature in triggering environmental consciousness (Walter, 2013).

To experience connection and 'sense it in our bones', we may have to activate abilities or 'intelligences' that may be 'dormant' (Gunnlaugson, 2007) because of decades of neglect. TL research rarely explicitly acknowledges embodied or somatic learning (Amann, 2003), for example, partly because of the Western dualism which separates body and mind (Clark, 2001). Yet the body plays a significant role in people's relationship and connection with place and land. The body is the key to experiential and affective connections with others and the environment. It is also central to a place-based approach. Land, or mere physical matter, becomes a place only when it is experienced through the body. Besides embodiment, Lange (2004) argues that 'restorative learning' – an anchoring in our own inner worlds and cultural and traditional roots to restore or conserve our core values – is also needed to complement TL, balance change with a sense of stability and restore valuable knowledge, traditions and values that may have been lost in processes of modernisation and globalisation.

(Self-)compassion

Compassion plays out as the theme which bridges connection and creativity. Compassion concerns the ability to be touched by the suffering of others (Neff, 2003; Nussbaum, 2001) and act to remove it (Miller, 2007; Way and Tracy, 2012). Self-compassion is about being kind and understanding towards oneself, understanding one's experiences as part of the universal human experience and being mindful of thoughts and feelings while not over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003). Compassion and self-compassion have been connected with increased caring for oneself and others (Jazaieri et al., 2016; Neff and Pommier, 2013; Welp and Brown, 2014), cultivating a sense of connectedness with others (Neff, 2003), successful and sustainable leadership (Boyatzis, 2005), and pro-environmental values, intentions and donations (Pfattheicher et al. 2015). Compassion for someone or something requires the recognition of the other as inherently connected with one's being. Becoming conscious of the interconnectedness of life has been shown to evoke compassion and altruism (Vieten et al., 2006): people become more 'service oriented' and motivated to act for positive change (Vieten et al., 2008). Compassion for nature may also be cultivated through the experience of belonging to it as a human being rather than being separated from it (Bannon, 1973).

(Self-)compassion is a key element in place-based TL, because it invites us: 1) to do the least possible harm to our immediate and distant surroundings (Bannon, 1973; Massey, 2004); 2) to respond actively when encountering suffering (Welp and Brown, 2014); 3) to be capable of holding multiple perspectives and thereby of embracing diversity

(Gunnlaugson, 2007); and 4) to act compassionately towards ourselves to avoid 'burn out' in responding to the suffering around us (Sohr, 2001).

TL research has implicitly described compassion and self-compassion. First, the process of developing self-compassion to overcome and prevent burn out as (environmental) activists has itself been described as a TL process (Kovan and Dirkx, 2003). Second, Vieten et al. (2006) suggest that a daily 'mind-body' practice is needed to teach the mind to tolerate changes in thinking patterns and behaviour (Vieten et al. (2006): 928). Third, a study by Chaves et al. (2015) shows that the processes of social change may be challenging, stressful, confronting and tiring. Difficulties, challenges and disruptions may however spur TL processes when a community can work its way through them. This includes an intense process of social learning (Chaves et al., 2015), and to this we would also add self-compassion. One of the main challenges the study describes is the clash of different visions and perspectives of sustainable living in a community (Chaves et al., 2015). This calls for what Gunnlaugson (2007: 145) refers to as tapping into a state of 'compassionate awareness', in which one no longer exclusively identifies with one 'interpretive ideology' but instead witnesses other perspectives as partial facets of an unfolding and larger dynamic.

Neurological research has shown that compassion can be learned quite simply: brain responses to video images of suffering have been shown to be different before and after only five days of compassion and empathy training (Klimecki et al., 2014). If we understand this to be a shift in people's consciousness, we can conclude that TL is manifested at a physical level.

Creativity

The last category, 'creativity', concerns explicitly manifesting the implicit in consciousness transformation or its evocation through creative practices. Creativity is about going beyond critiquing the old to creating the new (Tisdell, 2012). The creative realm is explicitly concerned with the space of interaction between human consciousness and biophysical systems: human consciousness is partly shaped through practices that embed humans in their biophysical environment. A shift in human consciousness towards a consciousness of interdependence thus involves shifts in these practices and results in changes in bio- physical systems. This supports the argument that 'the knowledge of the human system and conditions must be considered simultaneously and at corresponding multiple scales with knowledge of the social–ecological systems' (Tàbara and Chabay, 2013: 72). Zooming in on the human condition, creativity is said to be a prerequisite for being fully human (Cell, 1984; Maslow, 1968; Richards, 2007), because it is through our creativity and creative acts that we give unique expression to ourselves (Cell, 1984). Living creatively involves defining ourselves by what we are instead of what we have (Cell, 1984;

Maslow, 2012). It thus implies a shifting of our consciousness from a state of 'having' to a state of 'being', which improves our wellbeing, sense of meaning and purpose in life and allows us no longer to define our sense of identity and self-worth by the extent to which we obtain 'modern life securities' (Giddens, 1991). The power to transcend ourselves lies at the heart of our creativity. This is related to Gunnlaugson (2007) idea of the 'witness self' (see 4.b): the ability to 'look at ourselves and our world and being able to imagine them changed' (Cell, 1984: 15).

By understanding TL as a process occurring through engagement in practices, creativity is both the means through which TL can occur and simultaneously the dimension in which TL is manifested in observable, explicit form. A short-term experience is therefore only transformative when it involves enduring changes in behaviour as a result of engaging in practices in which a transformative experience and potential new insights, feelings or values can be expressed. This approach builds on practice theory, arguing that behaviour change is rooted in social practice (Hargreaves, 2011; Warde, 2005). Furthermore, for an experience to become transformative, an enhancing environment is re- quired for an enactment of experience that is integrated in daily practice. This calls for: 1) becoming or being part of a like-minded social network or community; 2) finding a language and context for the experience; 3) continuing to access new information and teachings; 4) a daily mind-body practice to tolerate cognitive and behavioural changes; 5) engaging in ways of creatively expressing or manifesting the experience through action; and 6) daily reminders, e.g. symbols either in one's environment or worn on one's body (Vieten et al., 2006). These examples reflect a state of being embedded in place, connected with ourselves and our surroundings by engaging in practices that enhance a state of 'being'. Apart from being embedded in place, creative acts also require the ability to cope with the insecurity and anxiety which inevitably arise when we commit ourselves to the vulnerable act of creativity (Cell, 1984; Maslow, 1968). This is linked to the previous theme of self-compassion.

Research linking creativity and transformative learning covers different types of creativity and does not always explicitly refer to the concepts of creativity and TL. A recent study shows that an intentional community consciously creates spaces for innovation and creativity. Fois (2019) suggests this generates spaces that embody 'vernacular creativity', a creativity that is disconnected from a competitive spirit and the need to generate economic value, and is not confined to a privileged class. Such experimental creativity is at the heart of 'enacting' utopias, as Fois (2019) describes. There is also some research that explores arts-based creativity in relation to (transformative) change. One study explores the role of art in the classroom in developing social consciousness and imagining social change (Ammentorp, 2007), showing that artistic expression is used to transcend concrete reality to imagine it being changed. The actual realisation of this process of social change

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is not included in their study. Another study shows that arts-based activities can foster new ways of experiencing the world, from which transformative strategies to address climate change may emerge (Galafassi et al., 2018). Finally, some studies link TL to (participatory) natural resource management (Armitage et al., 2008; Cumming et al., 2013; Diduck et al., 2012; Muro and Jeffrey, 2008; Sims and Sinclair, 2008). Finding ways to manage natural resources in a participatory way can be seen as a creative process that embodies ecological values of, for example, collaboration, dialogue and connection. Following Armitage et al. (2008), facilitating such a process re- quires considering and addressing place specificities, including issues of power, traditional taboos/sanctions/ ceremonies related to natural re- sources and livelihood/political risks. However, these studies do not explicitly address the creativity aspect. Furthermore, they tend to be confined to the more rational and cognitive dimension of TL.

Conclusion and discussion

The framework this paper develops is intended to explore if and how sustainability initiatives are places in which people learn to live out of an awareness of interconnection and a state of compassionate informing of the creative act of changing our ways of living. The framework may then be used to identify the practices and places which embody connection, compassion and creativity. The framework emerged simultaneously with a process of empirical research. Empirical insights from this and other research are required to further develop and ground the framework.

The building blocks we suggest here require further critical development to address several issues they are currently unable to meaningfully integrate. First, combining various disciplines and strands of research has made the framework relatively complex, which runs the risk of touching on various aspects while failing to delve sufficiently deeply into distinct ones. Yet this complexity fits a relational ontology and acknowledges the hyper-complex nature of sustainability. It should be the intention of research to grasp this complexity and honour it (Tàbara and Chabay, 2013).

However, the framework might be strengthened by further developing some approaches. For example, we have not discussed what wellbeing from a place-perspective would entail. Furthermore, the framework might be complemented by the addition of some quantitative scales or indicators – for example, considering people's wellbeing, the ability for (self-)compassion or sustainability indicators. However, caution is required concerning the choice of indicators or scales, because they can be controversial given the complex and sometimes politically loaded nature of the themes the framework covers. This paper has furthermore drawn attention to the need to rethink modern scientific

epistemology and ontology when researching the inner dimension of sustainability. This is a delicate and complex issue that a single paper can never fully explore and discuss. However, our aim has been to touch on some of the issues research may encounter in exploring sustainability that require, at the very least, an openness to the possibility of different kinds of knowing and worldview. Finally, the framework neither explicitly nor thoroughly examines structural issues, including power, social/political/economic/spatial inequality and how these in- fluence access to and inclusion in sustainability initiatives and experiences that might foster a TL process. This raises the question of whether and how the place-based TL this paper describes is only experienced in practice by an elitist minority, and why this matters if it is the case. The argument this paper develops provides some insights into developing the kinds of awareness and capacity which may help to foster people's ability to connect with 'otherness' from a place of e.g. compassionate awareness. Empirical research may provide more insights into concrete examples of this interaction with otherness as part of or resulting from place-based TL processes, and what this means for the futures sustainability initiatives envision.

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Chapter 5

Inner change and sustainability initiatives

Exploring the narratives of ecovillagers through a place-based transformative learning approach

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Introduction

How to address the 'wicked problems' of today's world concerning the interlinked issues of climate, water, food, energy and social justice is a pressing theme (Head 2014; Leal Filho and Esteves de Freitas 2018; Termeer et al. 2012). The wicked nature, characterized by inevitable complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of these problems calls for new ways of organizing human societies which allow for the continuation of human life on earth in a way that is sustain- able, socially just (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2016) and respective of nonhuman forms of living. Moving in that direction requires a deep learning process that engages with and transcends the complexity of these nexus issues (ibid).

Transition studies and place-based research both indicate that rather than grand schemes based on a 'one size fits all' approach, transformative solutions emerge at the local level (Barca et al. 2012; Geels 2010; Haxeltine et al. 2013; Roep et al. 2015). It is at this level that the complexity and inter- linked nature of these nexus issues can be grasped and solutions created that draw from, and are responsive to, particu lar place-based configurations. Transformative responses at this level drive wider social change and regime shifts (Geels 2010; Swilling 2013). The emergence of such niche innovations does require a deep learning process where multiple dimensions are aligned and new relations are created (Sol 2018; Sol and Wals 2014). There is still, however, a lack of clarity of the nature of this kind or learning, how it occurs and what influences it (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2016). Increasingly though, scholars are starting to explore the learning processes that give rise to these niche innovation, referred to from now on in this paper as 'sustainability initiatives', through the theoretical lenses of transformative and transgressive learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015; O'Sullivan and Taylor 2004). These theoretical perspectives are based on the argument that emancipatory forms of learning are more effective in fostering a meaningful engagement with sustainability issues compared to persuasion or economic and legal incentives (Wals and Jickling 2002). Trans- formative learning explores deep shifts in perspective or consciousness (see Section "Connection, compassion and creativity"). Transgressive learning is understood as a type of transformative learning focusing on how transformative learning can translate in disruptive agency and the transgression of hegemonic systems (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015; Macintyre et al. 2018, 2019). This paper uses these theoretical lenses, with a main focus on transformative learning, to explore the influence of more individual, inner learning processes in the context of ecovillages as sustainability initiatives which are characterized by their place-based character (Avelino et al. 2015; Wittmayer et al. 2015). We are concerned with learning processes that enable the creation of such ecological communities (Wals 2019). To do this, we mainly focus on inner learning at the level of the individual and include the learning processes that may have taken place before a community project might even have started in our analysis as well. In other words, we aim to understand how and why

people commit to a life in an ecovillage, one that is often quite radically different from more conventual ways of living.

As sustainability research seems to be on a quest for understanding how individuals, communities and societies get motivated to embrace more sustainable ways of liv ing (Batson and Thompson 2001; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Sapiains et al. 2015), the value of understanding this learning process becomes apparent. Thus, we pose that to understand the emergence and character of sustainability initiatives like ecovillages, we need to understand the learn ing processes taking place, both overtly and covertly, tangi ble and less tangible, that foster these visible outer changes and have the potential to transgress dominant systems. To obtain such a deeper understanding, we developed a theoretical framework which presents all aspects of a (place-based) transformative learning process that drives regenerative practices as found in the literature (Pisters et al. 2019). With this framework, we recognize the transformative potential of place-based inquiries and the phenomenological experience of a learner where object, subject, place and person are not separate entities (Greenwood 2009; McKenzie et al. 2009). In other words, shifts in consciousness never take place in a vacuum but in the space between the self, the social and the material (Newman 2014; Pisters et al. 2019). We thus take a relational perspective towards transformative learning whereby we aim to go beyond categories of individual or social/collective learning as they are first of all complementary and mutually influence one another and secondly these concepts tend to overlook the role of the material and nonhuman in such learning processes. Connection, compassion and creativity were suggested as key dimensions that can help structure, understand and approach transformative learning (Section "Connection, compassion and creativity"). This framework was based on the acknowledgement that sustainability transformations require change from the inside out (O'Brien 2013), including changes in the social-affective domains of values (Horlings 2015b), culture (Dessein et al. 2015), worldviews (Hedlund-de Witt 2013), beliefs and par- adigms and associated cognitive and emotional capacities of actors (Abson et al. 2017; Meadows 1999) and, indeed, consciousness (Devall and Sessions 1985; O'Sullivan and Taylor 2004).

Processes of sustainability do not only require people to think differently, they require as well shifts in 'being' and 'feeling' (Daloz 2004). We can for example cognitively know that our life is connected to the life of a tree, but really sensing this connection 'in our bones' is a different thing (ibid.). This is what we mean by 'consciousness': a dynamic, relational dimension that is constantly shaped in the interaction between people and their social and physical environment (Pisters et al. 2019). Viewed as such sustainability can be considered a process grounded in people–place relation- ships (e.g. Calvo and De Rosa 2017; Roep, et al. 2015) as well as in the dialogue or negotiations amongst all those involved in a particular community concerning the kind of future(s) they desire (Miller

2013; Weaver and Rotmans, 2006). We suggest that what people desire is dependent upon the kind of consciousness they embody, which is related to the internalization of a particular worldview and (cultural) values and practices. Understanding what kind of conscious- ness people embracing ecological ways of living embody, and how such consciousness emerges, is what this research seeks to understand.

The aim of this paper is then to critically investigate the framework with the aim of testing empirically its value as an analytical tool and to strengthen it in light of the inevitable shortcomings the framework has. For this, the main researcher conducted research in collaboration with and within ecovillages. We define ecovillages as place-based sustainability initiatives, referring to citizen initiatives aiming at conservation, transformation or regeneration of people–place relationships, embodying and materializing what sustainability means for them. Even though it is impossible to speak of ecovillages as one entity, many ecovillages have evolved, in one way or the other, from an ecological consciousness embodying alternative worldviews (Bokan 2015; Čarman 2015; Kasper 2008; Kirby 2003; Kunze 2015; Litfin 2009; Moore and Wight 2007; Tamm 2011; Wight 2008). Furthermore, in being actual places, ecovillages have shown to be able to turn such alternative understandings of our world into concrete places (Andreas and Wagner 2012; Kasper 2009) and create a bigger movement by connecting in national, regional and global networks.[1]

We explore the following questions: Do the experiences of ecovillagers reflect a learning process and if so how? Are the above-mentioned dimensions of connection, compassion and creativity central factors in this process? These questions are addressed by exploring narratives of meaningful experiences of people currently residing in ecovillages. By choosing a life outside the dominant structures and institutions of modern society in places that show radically different forms of organizing life, these people have intentionally and deliberately changed their lives in ways that are likely to expose them to a learning process. In such a context the learning process has also potentially been transformative.

In the next section we will first elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings of this study, mostly summarizing Pisters et al. (2019) with some additional theoretical reflections. In the second section we will explain the research method- ology. In the third we will present the results. In the final section we will discuss our findings and reflect on the frame- work and its value for understanding transformative learning processes that might lead to the emergence of regenerative practices and communities.

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1   For example the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) https://ecovi llage.org/.

Theoretical background: a place-based approach to transformative learning

Transformative learning theory was first coined by Mezirow (1978) and described as 'a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better justified meaning perspectives' (Mezirow 1978 in Taylor and Cranton 2012).[2] The theory has since then developed into many different perspectives that all respond to various strands of critique (Taylor and Snyder 2012; Tisdell 2012). The theory has been critiqued for being too Western biased, too much centered around rational thinking, too focused on the individual and not shedding light on the link between individual and social change, leaving out structural elements and being decontextualized. It has also been suggested that the concept of trans- formative learning is often misused, describing processes that are not necessarily transformative (Newman 2012). However, as O'Brien (2013) argues, we need to look at the role consciousness plays in our individual and collective approaches to climate change. This involves amongst other things to reflect upon our identities and upon the grounds on which they are build and confront our fears of change (ibid). For this reason, transformative learning seems to be a useful concept to meet the aims of this research, despite the above- mentioned critiques. From the many different approaches to transformative learning, this research mainly builds on a planetary perspective, defining a transformative learning process as a shift in consciousness from a modern, instrumental towards an 'ecological consciousness' (O'Sullivan and Taylor 2004).

In responding to different points of critique, we have suggested that transformative learning, at least when researching sustainability initiatives, should first of all be understood as a place-based process (Pisters et al. 2019). Even con- textualized perspectives to transformative learning usually refer to social, economic, and political contexts (for example in Clark and Wilson 1991), often overlooking geographical contexts and the role of material, including our bodies, and nonhuman factors in transformative learning. Understanding consciousness as evolving in the interaction between self, social and material (Newman 2014), transformative learning from a place-based perspective is a dynamic process that takes place in this space of interaction.

A transformative learning process should, we have argued, not be understood as transformative unless it unfolds or is grounded in the physical or material dimension, resulting in tangible change on the level of behaviour, social interaction and organization and material environment (Pisters et al. 2019). This supports the concept of transgressive learning and might partly solve Newman's (2012) concern whether learning processes are actually transformative if they lead to no observable, tangible changes. A place-

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2   For a more extensive account on the theory of transformative learn ing and our approach, see Pisters et al. (2019).

based approach thus acknowledges the *emplacement* of the learner and takes into account place-specific characteristics, including culture, local knowledge, spiritual practice and ontological views, besides the more material, geographical characteristics of a place. Spirituality for example has been acknowledged as a key factor in humans' relations to their non-human environment (Kamitsis and Francis 2013) and thus should be considered in learning processes that shift people's relationship to the nonhuman. Furthermore, consciousness studies and existing literature on transformative learning suggest that spiritual practice can be an important driver for shifts in consciousness (Chaves et al. 2017; Hart et al. 2000; Tolliver and Tisdell 2006; Vieten et al. 2008). As an addition to Newman's three dimensions (self, social, material) we therefore acknowledge a fourth; the metaphysical dimension (Pisters et al. 2019).

Understanding transformation as rethinking the very foundations of how we currently live our lives and shape our societies, goes beyond seeing sustainability as something that we add to our 'to do' list. Transformative and transgressive learning assumes that we need to go beyond resilience, mitigation, adaptation or conservation, as these do not chal lenge the foundation of the current dysfunctional system nor work toward disrupting the foundations of this system and creating something better altogether (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015). We do recognize that a part of transformative and transgressive learning is about identifying what things from different cultures and worldviews we do wish to honour, preserve and integrate in the new things that we are creating, as discussed in Pisters et al. (2019) and Lange (2004). This involves honouring valuable knowledge, practices, rituals, of various (indigenous) cultures without over romaniticizing them.

Connection, compassion and creativity
Building on the above, we developed a framework based on a literature review which shows (aspects of) the place-based nature of a transformative learning process and research that supports the theoretical thickness (Pisters et al. 2019). Key themes have been detected and clustered in three (analytical) dimensions: connection, compassion and creativity (see figure 4, chapter 4).

This first dimension reflects the core of an ecological consciousness; the interconnected nature of all life. Experi- encing and acting from this sense of interconnectedness is said to be the basis of living from an ecological conscious- ness (Bateson 1994; O'Sullivan and Taylor 2004). Existing research discusses some experiences that can enhance learning towards a state in which one is able to sense this state of interconnectedness. These include experiences that trigger a 'global consciousness': realizing how one's life is connected to places and people near and far and taking responsibility for them. Even though the theoretical framework is not be understood as a linear model per se (Pisters et al. 2019), establishing a sense of connection is required to be able to develop compassion and for

creative activity to be responsive of and in tune with its environment and aware of its impacts.

(Self)- Compassion, acting to alleviate suffering or do the least harm, naturally follows a sense of interconnection. This means that compassion cannot be experienced without a sense of being connected (Bannon 1973) and when we feel our life is connected to the life of those or that which suffers, we feel an urge to alleviate it (Bannon 1973; Pfattheicher et al. 2016; Vieten et al. 2006). It is, we have argued, a key element in place-based transformative learning as it invites for: (1) our acting doing the least harm as possible to our immediate and distant surroundings (Bannon 1973; Massey 2004); (2) an active response when encountering suffering (Welp and Brown 2014); (3) being able to hold multiple perspectives and thereby embracing diversity (Gunnlaugson 2007); and (4) acting compassionate towards ourselves to not 'burn out' in responding to suffering around us (Sohr 2001). Creativity is the materialization of a sense of interconnection and compassion or the means through which these can be experienced. This dimension is the least developed and often overlooked in research on transformative learning. This dimension involves the transformative impact of living a creative life based on being and 'self-actualization' (Maslow 1968) in contrast to living a less creative life in which one's core activity is acquiring modern life securities, a life thus based on having (Cell 1984; Giddens 1991; Maslow 2012). Furthermore, creativity emphasizes that the 'inner' is not a separate entity from the 'outer', shed- ding light on the relation between inner transformation and social action or agency. Creativity thus involves the materialization of inner change processes which can be changes in behaviour, lifestyle decisions, involvement in practices and initiatives that disrupt existing systems or create new ones, like social movements and in the case of this paper, the manifestation of place-based sustainability initiatives, like ecovillages.

Methodology

This research generally followed an ethnographic approach (see for example Dewan 2018) informed by many aspects of a new materialist social inquiry. Social inquiry from a new materialist ontology aims to transcend dualism between mind and matter, culture and nature and understands any studied reality as relational, ever evolving assemblages (Fox and Alldred 2015), reflected in our place-based understand ing of transformative learning.

The methodology used for this research aimed at understanding the learning processes of participants as relational processes that evolved in the constantly changing and dynamic assemblages the participants moved in and out of in the course of their life. To support this perspective, the first author conducted life-story interviews to get a story as rich as

possible of participants learning journey's seeking meaningful relational experiences that triggered shifts in consciousness. Besides these interviews, participatory photographic mapping (PPM) (Dennis et al. 2009) group sessions were organized to again elicit meaningful learn- ing experiences within their relational context and to allow narratives to emerge in a relational manner. Although this paper mainly drew from the interviews, a few excerpts that emerged from PPM are used. The data collection process and methods will be discussed in more depth after the following description of the three communities that participated in this research.

Selection and description of cases

Resulting from an extensive phase of orientation including short visits to six ecovillages in Finland, one in Sweden, two in Estonia and participation in the European annual confer- ence of the global ecovillage network (GEN) in a community in Spain, three communities were found for an ethnographic study. In Finland, two communities which both responded positively to the research and were willing to accommodate the main researcher for some time in their community were selected. In both communities it was possible to conduct the research in English, in some cases through the support of a Finnish speaking person. These two communities had very different reasons for existence, a different core focus and different demographics. 'Väinölä',[3] a theosophical com- munity, located in central Finland, was founded in 1978. Its inhabitants are mostly, with some exceptions, above 50 years old. There are no children currently living in the community. Väinölä has a shared economy and all its members live in the same building, sharing all meals and living spaces together except for a single individual room per inhabitant. Kurjen Tila[4] is a rather new community. The community is centred and located around a biodynamic farm and families live in separate houses, most of them ecologically built by them- selves. They are both open to and in interaction with the 'outside' world. As both Finnish communities are relatively small (< 40 members), the Portuguese community—Tamera[5]—was selected as it is one of the biggest communities in Europe and one of the pioneers. Tamera was found in 1978 by three visionary leaders and has since grown into a community of around 150 permanent members and hundreds of visitors every year. Tamera's members include children as well as 'elderly' and everyone in between. Community members live in smaller sub-groups, often around a particu- lar theme or work domain, including amongst others (solar) technology, permaculture and artistic and creative work. It has an influential and inspirational role in the European and Global Ecovillage Network and proliferates itself as Peace Research and Education Centre. Although all three commu- nities are very different, this research does not intend to do a comparative analysis, as it focuses on individual learning journeys.

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3   https://www.ihmisyydentunnustajat.fi/en/
4   https://kurjentila.fi/
5   https://www.tamera.org/.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Nineteen life-story interviews were conducted with partici- pants from the three communities, seven from Kurjen Tila, six from Väinölä and six from Tamera. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and uploaded to an online data analysis software platform (DEDOOSE[6]). Sampling of participants was done in a pragmatic manner. As the interviews required quite some time and willingness to speak openly about rather personal matters, a more structured selection procedure was not deemed suitable, even though there was a general aim to keep a balance between young and older participants, male and female and, when applicable, different nationalities. Some participants were personally approached by the main researcher or by the contact person in the com- munity, while others subscribed to a list after an invitation email and introductory meeting.

The interviews had the form of dialogues between researcher and participant. They were unstructured, although some guiding topics were used to start the con- versation. Typical opening questions included asking after participants background: places and family in which they were born and grew up, characteristics of their childhood and potential meaningful moments, and from there mov- ing onto to early adulthood, usually getting to the phase where more conscious lifestyle choices are being made or struggles and tensions arise in finding one's own path. Other sub-themes that were brought up included the moti- vation for joining a community project, the experience of the first period in community, difficult moments, decisive moments leading to their commitment to stay, and biggest lessons learned during their time in community. Once participants started talking, the researcher, when needed, asked for clarification of, or elaboration on, experiences that seemed potentially interesting.

The life-story interview transcripts have been analysed as 'narratives' by the first author. Narratives are accounts of subjective personal experience, where the teller gives his or her point of view toward what happened and points out what he or she considers significant (Smith 2000). A thematic approach was used (Riessman 2002) thus mainly focusing on the content of what had been told. The analysis focused on finding what Singer and Salovey (1993) defined as 'nuclear episodes': memories that play a conscious role in determining individuals' life choices and goals. The analysis looked for turning points, peak experiences, low points or insights participants described that, in retrospect, seemed to have guided the participants towards a life in an ecologi- cal community. Narrative analysis has been used to look at significant turning points in the course of people's lives, (McAdams et al. 2001; McLean and Pratt 2006), the mean- ing of peak-experiences in youth in the process of personal- ity development (Hoffman and Muramoto 2007),

6   https://www.dedoose.com/.

and lastly narrative analysis was used to explore the role of sense of place in navigating a transition process after a traumatic life event (Crossley 2001).

The narratives have been mostly vertically analysed, searching for types of experiences that were identified by several participants as meaningful, albeit the different nar- ratives reflected different variations. These nuclear episodes were coded and this process involved several rounds:

- The three dimensions and of the theoretical framework developed in Pisters et al. (2019) and the themes repre- senting them were used as starting point for formulating codes. More codes and sub-codes were added in the pro- cess.
- Once all interviews were coded, all codes created were retrieved and re-grouped, re-formulated, merged or split. Furthermore, code charts were retrieved that indicated the occurrence of codes.
- Codes and sub-codes were compared and organized through the initial dimensions in the theoretical frame- work, adding and complementing wherever needed.
- Preliminary findings were shared with the two co-authors and fellow researchers who provided critical feedback, pointing out, amongst other things, different perspec- tives and other angles from which the results could be interpreted. This resulted in another round of analysing in which it was critically assessed whether initial codes reflected also these other perspectives and whether cer- tain themes were overlooked in coding (which involved going back to the interviews and creating some more codes).

As mentioned above, a few excerpts were taken from the transcribed narratives that emerged from participatory photo mapping (Dennis et al. 2009) group sessions. For this paper, we only used these written transcriptions, which were ana- lysed similarly to the life-story narratives, as just described. For this exercise, the first author asked community members willing to participate to take pictures based on four guiding probes: 'a meaningful moment', 'a difficult moment', 'your favourite place' and 'what are you proud of'. These pictures were discussed in a group setting or, in one exceptional case, in a pair.

Results

The result section is organised along the three dimensions of the theoretical framework plus an additional dimension describing an element of the transformative learning journeys of participants that was not yet explicitly covered by the initial framework: transgression. We then describe the different themes that emerged for each dimension

using four categories: triggers, meta-cognitive learning processes, affective learning processes and challenges.

Connection: becoming aware of disconnection and seeking connection

The learning journey of many was initiated by one or more triggers or realizations that evoked a critical attitude towards hegemonic structures, the nature of which we will discuss in the last section of the 'Results'. These initial triggers which made participants aware of disconnectedness on various lev- els, evoked a search for connection, to places and people that shared participants' critical attitude or amongst which participants felt a sense of belonging. This process involved connecting to inspiring people, books and philosophies, travelling and learning about various ways of living and various philosophies of life trying out different professions or edu- cations and engaging in spiritual or personal development work. What followed for many was an experience of community: finding like-minded people, either in political activist, spiritual or ecological living spheres (food sharing, environ- mental work), 'accidentally' through travelling, co-housing projects or even mental health related spaces. For many these initial experiences of a sense of community created a longing for community, reflecting an affective learning process, and led to joining a community initiative or searching for one. For a few, the choice for joining the community was a more pragmatic one as it would allow them to carry out their activist, environmental or technological work in a way that aligned with their values: aspiring self-sufficient life and farming in the countryside in a social setting, creating a better work and life balance as environmental activist, taking political activist work to a next level and working on innova- tive eco-technologies without being confined by economic incentives, amongst others.

These first points of contact with alternative ideas and paradigms evoked a meta-cognitive learning process in which participants reflected upon their own identity, background, history, culture and position in the world and con- nected with the consequences of modernity and one's own lifestyle and actions. This involved critically reflecting on what dominant discourses, values and beliefs they had unconsciously internalized and learning how those affected their relationships, communities, and societies. Realizing there is a relationship between their inner worlds and the state of the outer world was something that for many participants came ones they actually joined or got involved in community initiatives. One participant, having grown up in Palestine, described how she came to understand that, even as a peace activist, she also carried the patterns of war she was fighting against, inside of herself. This realization came sometime after the community of Tamera approached her to join their project and she recalled it took her quite a while to actually realize that political activism also is about 'daring to go inside' and unravel patterns of, for example, war that are ingrained in ourselves and affect our relationships with each other.

Chapter 5

Realizing the need to go within and exploring alternative and more communitarian life-styles required the development of certain capacities and skills. First of all, turning to their inner worlds for almost all of the participants involved learning about and developing a positive spiritual practice, if this was not already part of participants' lives. One participant described how she learned a new kind of spiritual- ity, that unlike the conventional religious practice she was familiar with, did suit her: *"I did not have any contact with spirituality; this did not mean anything to me. I wanted to change the society … I had the feeling that religion is opium for the people, like Marx said. Prayer never sounded true to me, if somebody prays, he is just too lazy to do something. This was my understanding. But this changed." (Tamera 6).* She also described how this new kind of spirituality for her is closely related to embodied experiences, often as well in nature. For some, it also involved getting more in touch with the wisdom of the body and re-connecting to their feminine nature. One participant reflected upon the value of spiritual practice and inner work in a community setting, stating that through a shared process, so much more could be accomplished in very little time compared to doing the same process as an individual.

Then, another capacity involved developing a different relationship to the nonhuman world. For many participants this was in some way or another related to spiritual practice or experiences. For example, for some working with nature was experience as a spiritual practice: *"this handwork …. this is very spiritual …..if you are working with soil you are not going into your thoughts too deep. You have this soil, this something concrete, you can be there and feel …. the elements" (Kurjen Tila 6).*

Another theme under capacities and skills includes learning to re-connect to other humans in an authentic way. A compelling example is the story of a participant sharing how she used to be fond of photographic nature scenes and how at some point during her first experience in a community she realized she no longer only wanted to photograph nature, but instead turned to taking pictures of other people around her, as she started to see the beauty in them, the same way she used to in natural scenery. Furthermore, the development of capacities and skills was always complemented with a meta-cognitive learning process to place the need and longing for developing these capacities in a historic, political and social context. Learning the capacity of being in touch with the intelligence and wisdom of the body and its sensual and sexual nature was complemented by learning about the history of our bodies, how historically and in different times and places on earth the body and sexual- ity was approached and either celebrated or repressed, and what impact that has on our relationship to our bodies in present day and hence how the quality of this relationship impacts the way we relate to each other. Likewise, learning to connect to otherness was embedded in a meta-cognitive process of understanding how a sense and even fear of other- ness has come about historically, politically and culturally. A simultaneous affective learning process served to confirm the need and benefits of

developing these capacities, skills and new relationships with the self, the body, others and the nonhuman and spiritual environment. For example, by experiencing how nature responds with abundance when we learn how to work with it, experiencing a sense of belonging and purpose through community, experiencing the impact of bodywork and experiencing how connecting to our femininity and sexual nature unlocked creative energy and experiencing the positive impact of spiritual practice.

Challenges around the dimension of connection lie in having to make constant efforts to move away from states of disconnection. Apart from a sense of disconnection that triggered participants to look for a life in connection, a sense of disconnection can also be present while living in a community, for example, in the process of finding one's place in a community during the first year(s), in times of conflict or concerning certain aspects of community life about which one has different ideas from others. Overcoming a state of disconnection was described as a learning process in several narratives and can mean different things, including: learning honest and open communication in a community setting which may involve being confronted with parts of yourself you try to hide; learning to accept criticism as an opportunity to grow and unlearning the tendency to compete with others; learning to make decisions together; realizing the need for tools to work through conflicts with others; dealing with emotions, fears, trauma's from the past that are triggered when faced with conflict; navigating the space between stability versus change, also in confrontation with other community members' reluctance to change. Working through such states of disconnection showed to require the ability to practice self-compassion as will be discussed in the next section.

Compassion: from emotional detachment and boundaries to relating to self and others compassionately

The dimension of compassion showed to be mostly about developing capacities and skills: developing and nourishing the ability to be compassionate towards self and others. Cultivating the ability of compassion and self-compassion started with participants becoming aware of the suffering of self and others, described in more detail in the section 'Transgression'. As a result, participants started a search for connection to like-minded people, ideas and initiatives as described above, and started experimenting with different kind of actions to address the suffering. In many cases though, taking action initially stemmed from a sense of anger, frustration and was sometimes characterized by overburdening oneself and sacrifice. Developing compassion was reflected in participants' accounts of learning not to judge or even 'hate' people who continued living in those ways that participants challenged. This involved learning not to judge, for example, neighbour farmers who do things differently, but instead focus on what you have in common while at the same time inspire those others by showing that a different way of doing things is possible. Similarly, some went through a meta-cognitive learning process of accepting that

not everyone feels the urge for action and change, or recognizes the need but does not act upon it. As one participant noticed, reflecting a complementary embodied affective learning process, she had to learn no to *"hate people whose behaviour is environmentally destructive. This first of all drains you and can literally make you sick" (Tamera 1)*. Another participant realized that being angry with others for their misbehaviour can show you that *"you forgot that those structures are also inside of you…. And you realize that everyone has a different path, not everyone might be able to do what you do" (Tamera 2)*.

Furthermore, developing self-compassion appeared to be valuable for many participants in navigating change to stay committed to a community project and have patience with others and themselves as *"we don't change from one day to another" (Tamera 6)*, referring to the transition to a communitarian lifestyle coming from a highly competitive society. Similarly, being successful at change also showed to require learning to cope with the inconsistency and messiness of living 'sustainably' and letting go of perfectionism and rigidity.

The analysis showed the presence of a continuous process of balancing creating (manifesting ecological values, either in the form of creating community or in other ways before joining community) with well-being and self-compassion. For some joining a community project partly was an act of self-compassion by choosing a place where one can create a live aligned with one's values in a supportive environment which also respects individual wellbeing and self-care. This opposed to for example a career as environmental activist in a high-pressure work environment. Joining a community showed to offer this balance for some, at least most of the time. Finding this balance can be challenging, especially in times of conflict community can be an extra 'burden' to one's wellbeing: in this case, as the data reflects, the question is whether a person individually and the community as a group will take the situation as a burden or as a learning opportunity, an opportunity for growth. In any case, living and working through conflict, showed to require a lot of innovative creativity at both individual and community level, in addition to the capacity for self-compassion to give oneself the needed perspective and self-care to stay healthy and sane in challenging times. This can take various forms from in depth therapy sessions to work through unresolved trauma, to taking enough time to retrieve to silence, to find support amongst peers, find support in broader community networks, taking a holiday or simply going for a walk every day. Furthermore, for some participants conflict situations led to a partly affective and partly meta-cognitive learning process in which participants learned to figure out how to give authentic expression to themselves in difficult situations, find ways in which to positively influence the situa- tion and step into their own power, as opposed to hiding, leaving or letting oneself be intimidated. At the same time, it served as a meta-cognitive learning process in which they questioned or sharpened their motivations for being part of a community project thereby getting more

clarity on their visions, dreams and ideas and whether or not these could possibly be part of the bigger community vision. In this way, dissonance and conflict can be drivers for transformative learning (Wals and Heymann 2004), both at the more individual level as well as at the community level, as also shown in the study by Chaves et al. (2015). As one participant described, *"a result of such a conflict is that you are invited to look at things within yourself that are unresolved, which you otherwise would probably not have done as we all tend to not get too far out of our comfort zones if not necessary…. And in this process, it's impor- tant to not forget to be kind and loving towards yourself and others wherever possible"* (PPM Kurjen Tila).

Creativity: from converging and sameness to authentic divergence

The last dimension, creativity, is about the possibility of creating something different, diverging from the norm and the creative expression of one's authentic self. Participants described the possibility of creating something different, and learning (capacities and skills) how to do this, as essentially the biggest 'benefit' of community. To be part of an experiment that works towards creating different, counter hegemonic structures in the areas of family life and relationships, technology (energy, housing, water), food production, education, decision making, spirituality and religion, work and profession, health, culture and social justice. The community brought participants the opportunity to create some- thing that they would not have been able to do alone, it made it easier to integrate ecological habits into daily life and it allowed many to manifest their alternative vision to profession and work. Joining a community gave one participant the opportunity to experiment with new technologies without being limited by financial pressures and incentives. As this participant realized, "when you start creating, making, and shaping without a pressure of money or economic reason- ing behind it, you create very different things as it is not just cost-efficient products and services that will survive" (Tamera 3).7 How creativity further manifests in transgressive practices at the collective level is beyond the scope of the present paper. For now, we will discuss some examples of the role of creativity at the individual level of transformative learning processes.

First of all, creative living came forward in the interviews as making, divergent, non-confirmative, non-conventional but authentic life-choices and a continuous process of self- actualization: shaping a life in which one can be one's best self (Cell 1984; Maslow 2012; Richards et al. 1988). Reflect- ing an affective and meta-cognitive learning process, this involved anything from not following the dominant narrative of financial security and stability by quitting ones secure job, to searching for ways of living beyond the model of nuclear families, rejecting external expectations with regards to major life choices in the area of education, profession and civil duty and instead learning how to give authentic expression to oneself. Some participants described how they felt slightly unfit to 'normal' social situations or expectation. Their resistance to converge resulted in a

search for spaces and professions that did feel right. What appeared helpful for many in this process was a change in environment: physically moving to a different place, either living or travelling to a different country, moving from rural to urban or from village lifestyle to anarchistic student realms and even a period in jail, as a result of refusing army service were mentioned as important, valuable and refreshing experiences. These shifts in environment and getting away from the familiar allowed participants to 're-invent' themselves. This learning process continued, and for some intensified in a community setting.

Furthermore, many participants described the value of arts-based creativity as practice for expressing oneself, to make sense of inner learning processes or as a way through which connection was experienced, all of which are affective learning processes. The almost sacred act of making music (together) or writing poetry appeared crucial for some participants wellbeing, *"through music I can express things of myself that I can not in any other way" (PPM, Väinölä)*. Creative work, also served as a kind of healing tool throughout some participants journeys, for example as a way to connect to people through photography; using writing in group settings to explore confusing emotions around love and sexuality; experiencing one's creative workshop as a meditative place to be alone and at peace; making sense of inner and spiritual learnings by expressing it in any form of art and using music as a way to live through as well as navigate and give space to intense emotions.

Other participants experienced a sense of connection through creative practices. One participant mentioned experiencing a true sense of connection with nature when witnessing how nature responded to their community's intervention in creation of natural lakes. Seeing this intervention result in an abundance of plant and animal species returning to a once deserted area. For some creative work evoked a spiritual experience of connection, such as experiencing an almost spiritual connection to life by creating technologies based on life's energy sources. Another participant realized that learning to be more in touch with her feminine and sensual nature 'unlocked' her creative energy, which led her to create for example theatre shows. Another participant described the connection to others through a creative process: *"in designing, planning and building something together, as simple as a compost deposit, something more evolves out of this than just the compost deposit itself, something that lies in the connection that was fostered between each other in doing this together" (PPM Kurjen Tila)*.

Transgression: from complacent to critical
In the empirical analysis it became evident that the theoreti- cal framework lacked one aspect that seems to be a prereq- uisite for connection, namely the will and initial motivation to transgress current dysfunctional systems. Many participants identified one

or more 'realizations' or 'triggers' that resulted in a critical attitude towards dominant hegemonic structures. The triggers they described included first of all, witnessing suffering, in some cases directly related to political events. One participant for example grew up as a young woman in Palestine, realizing at some point in her adolescent years the situation she and her fellow Palestinians were in. Before becoming aware of her own precarious situation, she recalled being deeply touched by images on television of starving people in Rwanda. Another participant recalled being appalled by the stories of the second world war, and as a child growing up in Germany wanting to know from her parents how this could have happened. Yet another example is witnessing the damage that had been done to a piece of land due to industrial activity. Even though all these situations triggered an awareness in participants, the question why they felt an urge to act upon this awareness while others witnessing the same things do not remained unresolved. Part of the explanation might lie in the nature of their character and their apparent ability to allow difficult emotions that surface when confronted with suffering. More importantly for participants learning journey however appeared to be to get to terms with the realization that not everyone seems to have the urge to take action, which in some cases led to feelings of anger and frustration. Another related trigger was being confronted with the inhibitions that come with one's given identity, for example feeling inhibited by being a woman in Portugal during the dictatorship or expected to join army forces as a young man in Finland. This relates to many participants mentioning a sense of uncomfortableness with external expectations, economic incentives and a competitive spirit they experienced in education, work and family environments. Lastly, meeting role models in the form of either visionary persons or social initiatives, who opened one's eyes to new perspectives and embodied a 'promise of transgression' as well as offered tangible actions to manifest it, was often identified as marking a turning point. These triggers led to partly affective, partly meta-cognitive learn- ing domains as they evoked feelings of frustration and hence a process of questioning dominant morals, cultural values and beliefs. For some, the motivation or will to transgress was more subtle expressed by a feeling of confusion about who to be and a general sense of being 'out of place', nothing that was offered in terms of education, work, family or future prospect felt truly meaningful.

Discussion

The paper started by asking if and how the (analytical) dimensions of connection, compassion and creativity are part of a transformative learning process towards an ecological consciousness. The analysis showed that these dimensions were indeed reflected in people's life-stories. The analysis also showed that the initial framework lacked a dimension that seemed to be a prerequisite for embarking on a transformative learning

journey, namely the motivation or 'will to transgress' by moving away from complacency and develop and voice a critical perspective. This both ini- tiated and complemented participants' learning journeys. Developing this ambition to challenge and disrupt normal- ized unsustainable systems, a part of transgressive learning (Peter and Wals 2016), can be understood as the fuel that started and keeps the fire of commitment to change burning throughout participants' learning journeys. A prerequisite for moving from complacency to developing and voicing a critical perspective is being mindful of, and having the ability to, let oneself be touched by the suffering one witnessing in self and others, instead of resorting to emotional 'numbing' (Brown 2012) as a result of feeling powerless or overwhelmed. Furthermore, as Brown (2012) states, we cannot selectively numb emotions. By numbing negative emotions, we will also numb joy, gratitude and happiness. This sug- gests that the ability to face suffering and handle emotions that surface when doing so may also enhances our capacity for experiencing positive emotions like joy and happiness.

Moving on to the dimension of connection, another kind of inner fire appeared to have an important role. Interview- ees shared how they came to understand that spirituality can be a driver for change and that inner work is a crucial aspect of a transformative change process. This supports the work of, amongst others, Napora (2017) and Vieten et al. (2008) who show the role of contemplative practice in manifesting a more compassionate, socially just and inclu- sive society. Part of this spiritual work included the realiza- tion that all the things one dislikes in the outer world, and would like to change, are also deeply ingrained in one's own inner structures. This asks for overcoming the illusion of separateness in which the self is seen as different from the, potentially 'evil', other and reflects the need to look beyond the dichotomy of the inner and outer dimension of places and understanding the meaning of change from the inside out (Horlings 2015a; O'Brien 2013). These insights also raise questions about the nature of spirituality when linked to social change and the will to transgress collective systems. Does spiritual practice have a different character and meaning when linked to a larger purpose of social change rather than mere individual transformation? Integrating this in a place-based perspective to transformative learning might counter the risk of transformative learning becoming just a theory of 'personal development' in the spirit of a neo- liberal culture of self-development and wellbeing (Newman, 2014, p 347).

The data reflect that an important part of people's learning journey is to learn through and cope with challenges. Life in communities does not always reflect a state of connection and compassion. The ability to deal with conflict, for example, is an inherent part of being able to live in a community. Given the observation that nine out of ten community initiatives fail in achieving a successful community due to mainly social problems (Christian in Joubert and Alfred 2014), the need for social and inner work as the basis

for shaping our places into ways that allow for harmonious and cooperative ways of living together, including the human and non-human, seems apparent. As Joubert and Alfred (2014, pp xi–xii) state; *"most of us have been educated in a way that has made us believe that we are fundamentally greedy and selfis*h", which is not a particularly fruitful base for building communities and social movements for a peaceful world. Rewiring these built-in structures seems to be the basis for any kind of sustainability initiative (ibid).

Compassion was furthermore reflected in learning to acknowledge and respond to suffering through environmen- tal, social and political activism and alternative lifestyle choices, while at the same time not undermining or sacrificing emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. This involves being patient with oneself, embracing the messiness and imperfect nature of the learning process and as well becom- ing compassionate towards 'the other' who does not seem to act or care. This transcending of frustration and anger might be an important aspect of a transformative learning process to avoid more separation, disconnection and misunder- standings between 'activists' and those who feel intimated or attacked. Even though community can be a space where it becomes easier to prioritize self-care and personal well- being in a process of working towards change, and in fact understand these two as related in line with Belton (2014), Grinde et al. (2017) and Hall (2015), intense situations in the community like conflict do pose a challenge to individual wellbeing. The data showed how leaning into conflict and the ability to use conflict as an opportunity for growth requires compassionate care for oneself to stay healthy and sane. These findings support that self-compassion helps to resolve conflicts in an authentic way, balancing the needs of oneself and others (Yarnell and Neff 2013) and may help to prevent 'compassion burnouts', a well-known phenomenon among environmental and political activists (Kasper 2008; Kovan and Dirkx 2003; Pines 1994; Sohr 2001).

Creativity emerged from the data as a process of 'self-actualization' (Maslow 1968), a resistance to converge and instead seek ways to give authentic expression to life. Fur- thermore, the process of diverging involved making non- confirmative and non-conventional lifestyle choices and creating the space for creative and purposeful work that is not bounded by financial incentives or external expectations. Joining a community for many provided the opportunity to do this, to a certain extent. Creativity practice also showed to be a way to experience connection, pointing at the crucial difference between authentic connection and converging. An interesting avenue for further research in this regard would be to dive deeper into the topic of diverging in contrast to alienation. Lastly, the results showed the importance of arts-based creative practices for participants to express themselves. This may support their sense of agency, following Scanlon and Mulligan (2007) who state that creative expression can help people construct self-narratives that provide a sense of meaning in a changing, and (often threat- ening),

world. At their best, Scanlon and Mulligan (ibid.) argue these self-narratives give people a stronger sense of agency relating to Giddens' (1991) analysis of the role of self-therapy in modern societies.

Based on the results, we realized the need to place more emphasis on the dimensional character of the theoretical dimensions of the framework we developed in Pisters et al. (2019). As the results show, the learning journey of participants is a continuous process of consciously moving towards the favourable side of a certain dimension and overcoming obstacles and challenges that interfere with this process. All four dimensions then embrace two sides of a continuum. Together, the dimensions then make up a four-dimensional space in which learning takes place, visualized in the new visual representation of place-based transformative learning in Figure 5.
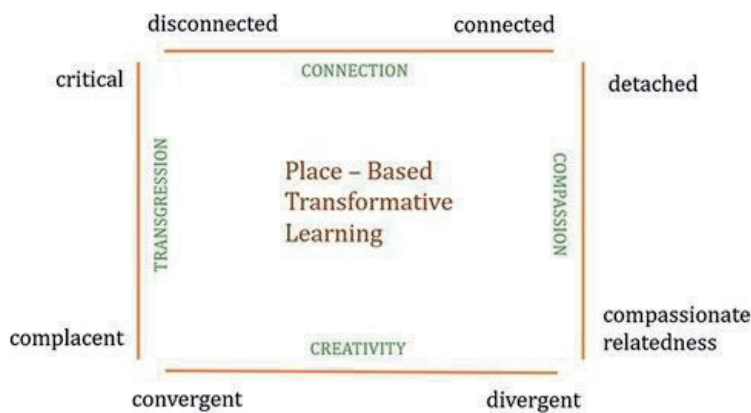
Figure 5. 'Place-Based Transformative Learning', a theoretical framework reflecting place-based transformative learning as a fourdimensional process

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical framework developed in Pis- ters et al. (2019) appeared useful to describe and under- stand the learning journeys of ecovillagers. The framework did however lack a comprehensive category describing the development of a critical perspective that ignites a will to change, triggering, complementing and underlying individuals' transformative learning journeys. This will and ambition to transgress manifests in a search for, and attempt at manifestation of, alternative sets of practices and social, material, spiritual configurations which are rooted in connection and compassion. This possibility of creating a place that embodies counterhegemonic practices, structures and dis- courses is what drew participants into a life in an ecovillage. As this paper

showed, consciously working towards transgressing dominant systems and structures requires a process of inner change as well, in which internalized patterns, values, beliefs and behaviour that foster disconnection and hence an inability for compassion are identified and trans- formed, both at the level of the individual and consequently in social relations. This process of transformation starts before joining a community project, 'priming' participants for this adventure through a gradual chain of experiences and learnings. This process often starts with a will to transgress, complemented or followed by experiences that evoke a sense of connection upon which it is possible to develop the ability to cultivate compassion and live creatively. Different aspects of this learning process included triggers which led to an awareness of unfavourable circumstances, followed by meta-cognitive and affective learning processes in which initial insights were unravelled, alternatives were considered and in which participants experienced the potential of alternatives to the dominant moral. At the same time, they developed certain capacities and skills which allowed them to change their relations towards, self, other, the material, non-human and spiritual as well as to cope with challenges. In this process, participants moved in the space between four dimensions, as visualised in figure 5.

This learning process furthermore turned out to have a place-based character through the various influences of place related experiences: moving through culturally and geographically different places; the influence of cultural, political and historical aspects of places in evoking the will and ambition to transgress and a critical perspective upon one's own identity; developing a different relationship to the material, nonhuman dimension of ones environment; spiritual experiences in nature and lastly the challenges that come with literally sharing a place with others in more intimate ways. In addition, participants showed to embody or develop over time a consciousness that embraced a sense of responsibility for places both near and far.

Moving on from the key insights of this research to questions of applicability, the question arises whether spaces can be created in which people are introduced to the kind of practices and experiences identified in this paper that are potentially transformative and open up or shift people's consciousness. Such spaces could for example be created in (higher) education settings (Napora 2017) and in public spaces or institutions. This calls for more research on how to create the right conditions and governance action to manifest it. Moreover, a better understanding of these inner processes that underly places like ecovillages can contribute to better understand what Bendell (2018) defines as the capacity for 'creative adaptation' that refers to acknowledging the possibly catastrophic consequences of climate change and finding the courage to respond while being able to take care of and enhance our individual and collective wellbeing. In fact, the results and theory discussed in this paper give several clues with regard to the beneficial effects on individual and collective wellbeing as a result of the learning experiences people go

through on the path towards a more ecologically consciousness lifestyle. Recognizing and becoming conscious of our own 'shadow' site (identified as a necessary process in Jungian psychology in psychological wellbeing and in relating to the perceived 'evil other' or enemy (Zweig and Abrams 1991)), developing self-compassion, integrating positive spiritual and contemplative practice in daily life, using creative ways to express oneself, finding ones authentic self through confrontational situations, the ability to lean into the full spectrum of emotions instead of numbing difficult ones, and developing an intimate relationship with nature. All of which have been identified, as discussed in this article, as positive influences on people's wellbeing and happiness, and thus suggest that the process of transformation towards a different kind of society is nothing like a sacrifice but an opportunity to become more fully human and increase our wellbeing. Further research would be needed to critically explore this argument.

Another aspect that requires more research is the potential of transgression at the community level, a part of the dimension of 'Creativity' that was beyond the scope of this paper. This paper showed how a will to transgress trig- gered or nudged participants toward transformative learning journeys which led them to life in an ecovillagers. The paper then discussed some aspects of community life that further impacted participants individual learning journeys. We did not however, discuss how these individual journeys feed into collective learning journeys at community level that may result in materialising transgressive social- material structures, new social material configurations that counter current hegemonic structure and are models for new, alternative ones.

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Chapter 5

Chapter 6

"We learned the language of the tree"

Ecovillages as spaces of place-based transformative learning

Authors: Siri Pisters, Hilkka Vihinen, Elisabete Figueiredo and Arjen Wals

Introduction

Transition studies and place-based research indicate that solutions to the wicked problems we are facing today emerge at the local level (Barca et al., 2012; Haxeltine et al., 2013; Roep et al., 2015). At this level, the complexity of unsustainable processes can be grasped and solutions can be created that are responsive to particular place-based configurations. So-called rooted learning-based solutions take local histories, dynamics and capacities as a starting point for co-creating solutions (Kronlid, 2014). While there is a growing body of research on 'niche innovations' (Avelino et al., 2014; Haxeltine et al., 2013), which we refer to in this paper as sustainability initiatives, little research has been done on the actual learning that takes place in these sustainability initiatives. In this study, we attempt to understand the character of the learning processes that underpin place-based sustainability initiatives.

Increasingly, scholars are exploring such learning processes through the theoretical lenses of transformative (TL) and transgressive learning. Based on some key works on both TL (see Pisters et al., 2019) and transgressive learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015, 2016), we come to the following composite descriptions. Transformative learning refers to learning processes that trigger a profound change in ones' values, principles and ways of understanding, interpreting and experiencing the world. Ultimately such changes represent a shift in consciousness. These processes typically involve being exposed to alternatives, mirroring different perspectives and inviting forms of dissonance. Transgressive learning explicitly seeks to disrupt structures that keep certain (often hegemonic and resilient) values, principles and ways of understanding and seeing the world intact; it does so by questioning the taken for granted, making the ordinary problematic and engaging in forms of resistance.

From the perspective of sustainability, both transformative and transgressive learning represent a certain normative direction. TL typically involves a shift in consciousness from a modern, instrumental consciousness to an ecological one characterized by the understanding of interdependence and a relational understanding of our world and everything that exists in it. Transgressive learning, on the other hand, seeks to trigger systemic change by challenging and disrupting hegemonic structures of power that lead to global dysfunction.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, we created a place-based perspective to TL (PBTL) (Pisters et al., 2019). In previous work, we explored PBTL processes at the individual level among people living in ecovillages (Pisters et al., 2020). In this paper, the focus is on learning at the community/collective level.

Ecovillages are an example of place-based sustainability initiatives. They demonstrate a track-record for radically decreasing their environmental footprint. Although they are local and relatively small by nature, most are not isolated islands and are increasingly linked through national, international and transnational networks (Kunze & Avelino, 2015; Litfin, 2009). The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) aims to support and strengthen its member communities and connect them to each other to create more power and agency to spur wider systemic change. GEN also collaborates with other like-minded networks including the Transition Network and Permaculture movement.

Via a number of channels, ecovillages promote their vision and ideas on sustainable lifestyles: via educative courses, the inclusion of (long-term) volunteers, (political) activism, local and regional co-operation (e.g. organic farmers, food networks, the creation of a new education system such as the community of Tamera). These are all ways in which intentional communities can lead to transformative and transgressive learning. Furthermore, an intentional community is a learning process in and of itself, since developing thriving communities is a challenging process (nine out of ten ecovillages initiatives fail due to social problems, (Joubert & Alfred, 2014). Even if an initiative is successful, sustainability involves continuous learning (Chambers et al., 2013). GEN, as well as other initiatives, aim to be a platform supporting communities' learning and development processes.

This paper aims to develop a better understanding of transformative and transgressive learning in these communities. We do this by using the most recent version of our theoretical framework of PBTL to analyse empirical material collected in Finland and Portugal. The main question this paper addresses is: 'Are the four dimensions of PBTL (as developed in Pisters et al., 2020) reflected in collective learning processes in the communities of Kurjen Tila, Väinölä and Tamera? And if so, how?'

Theoretical Framework

We understand PBTL as a learning process that involves a shift in consciousness at the individual and/or collective, systemic level (Pisters et al., 2019, 2020). Our framework of PBTL is the result of a) an extensive literature review (Pisters et al., 2019) of the concept and use of transformative learning in relation to sustainability transitions as well as additional literature that goes deeper into sub-topics (e.g. Clark & Wilson, 1991; Gunnlaugson, 2005; 2007; Lange, 2004; 2012; Neff, 2011; Newman, 2014; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004) b) insights from our own empirical work (Pisters et al., 2020) testing the initial framework as developed in Pisters et al., (2019) and c) the additional analysis of recent literature that deepened or helped conceptualize existing and new insights (e.g. Lange, 2018; Lotz- Sisitka et al., 2015, 2016).

Based upon our initial literature study (Pisters et al., 2019), we understand consciousness as evolving in the interaction between the self, the social and the material (ibid, Newman, 2014), which includes the non-human and more-than-human. With the term 'more-than-human' we refer to beings, traits, phenomena and experiences that remain unacknowledged in most modern, dualistic ontologies, including the spiritual and somatic, intuitive and animistic forms of knowledge (Abram, 2017). PBTL is a dynamic process that takes place in this space of interaction, following a relational ontology (Barad, 2003; Gamble et al., 2019; Lange, 2018). In Pisters et al. (2019), we developed our initial theoretical framework based on three themes: connection, compassion and creativity. In Pisters et al. (2020), we tested this framework empirically and concluded that all three dimensions were indeed confirmed by the empirical material. Additionally, we concluded that the learning journey of community members often started with a sense of critique towards current unsustainable hegemonic structures (ibid). Based on this, another theme was added to the framework: 'transgression.' Themes were also reframed as 'dimensions' with two oppositional qualities. The resulting four-dimensional framework (Figure 4, chapter 5) serves as the basis for this paper. The four dimensions are: connection to place, compassionate connection, creativity and transgression. Each dimension has two oppositional qualities that can be under- stood as the different sides of the same coin. Every quality also 'corners' with a complementary quality from another dimension: being distanced, for example, corners with being disconnected in order to be re-connected, while the quality of being critical corners with the quality of being divergent and so on. Lastly, two axes emerge from the four corners: community and disruption.
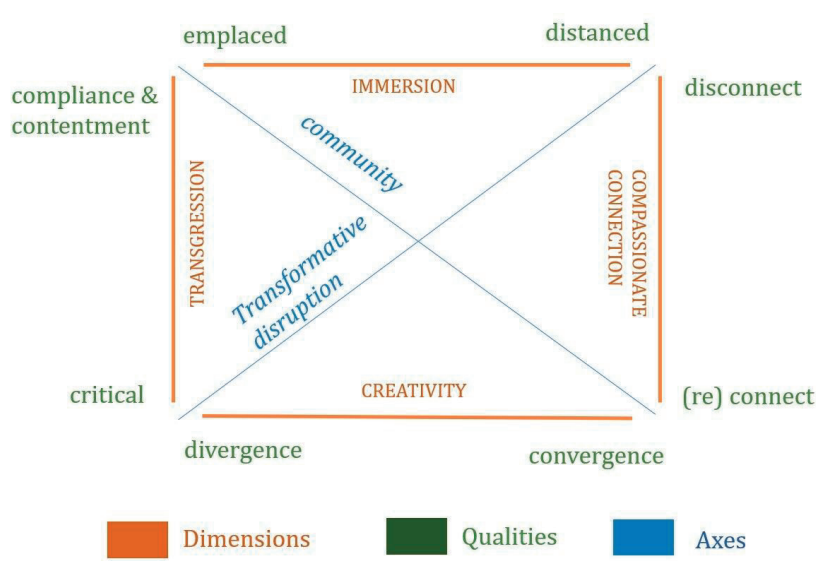

Figure 6. A four dimensional impression of place-based transformative learning (PBTL)

Connection to place is about being emplaced in the day-to-day life of a community in a specific geographical location (physically, ecologically, socially, culturally, spiritually and politically) while being relationally connected to more distanced people and places in an increasingly globalized world (Pisters et al., 2019). Being emplaced involves being connected to (community) values, to (local) culture including (re)appreciating traditional ecological knowledge and lifestyles (Lam et al., 2020; Lange, 2004, 2012), to the non-human and more-than-human and to our bodies and senses (Pisters et al., 2019). Being emplaced in a community requires a certain level of being compliant, adhering to a set of guidelines, common norms and social constructs, which allows for the functioning of daily life. Furthermore, a certain level of being content is key within a change process, in order to accept the imperfect nature of current realities (Pisters et al., 2020). Being emplaced in a place and community, and finding contentment in this state, makes the upper right corner of the framework a space of stability. This sense of stability functions as a stable basis from which to engage with the opposite, more disruptive, corner of PBTL where the qualities of being critical and being divergent meet.

Balancing the quality of being emplaced is that of being distanced: the ability of communities and initiatives to be conscious of, and harness relations to, people and places that are physically distant (Massey, 2004). This involves keeping permeable 'boundaries' to be in constant, dynamic interaction with the world outside. This may include being part of wider national and international networks (Litfin, 2009). The quality of being distanced corners with that of being disconnected under the dimension of compassionate connection. This is about looking at ourselves and others with compassionate awareness from a witness perspective (Gunnlaugson, 2007) in order to not exclusively identify with one particular ideology or perspective. It includes a relationship with our own inner world, while at the same time recognizing our common humanity which is essential for cultivating compassion for both ourselves and others (Neff, 2011). To be 're-connected' refers to compassionately connecting with others (people as well as non-human beings). When we feel our life is connected to the life of that which suffers (human and non-human), we feel an urge to alleviate the suffering and ensure that our actions cause the least harm (Bannon, 1973; Pfattheicher et al., 2016). This awareness of interconnection can have a spiritual character (Vieten et al., 2006).

The quality of being re-connected corners with that of being convergent, which reflects the social quality of the dimension of creativity: the ability of people to come together to do things, organize parts of their lives together and take social and collective action. Convergent creativity specifically acknowledges the value of materializing alternative ideologies as opposed to merely protesting, criticizing or sending knowledge into the world (Haluza-DeLay, 2008). This collective quality is balanced by that of being divergent, which is about embracing difference and authenticity and feeding this into the

collective for it to be dynamic. Difference creates spaces where new things can emerge (Williams, 2013, pp. 11– 13). A monoculture stagnates the possibility for change and newness, eliminating potential and creativity. From this perspective, (human) creativity is not something that is simply possessed by one 'masterful agent' but something that flows through and between diverse agents (Connolly, 2013, p. 407), including non-human ones.

Cornering the quality of being divergent is the quality of being critical, from the dimension of transgression. This involves not overidentifying with a specific com- munity or place and maintaining a critical perspective. From divergence and authenticity, space is created to be critical towards taken-for-granted norms, values and institutions inside and outside the communities a person considers themselves part of. The ability to be critical is the opposite of doing business as usual, of complying with explicit and implicit social norms, and of resorting to one hegemonic modern worldview. Critique is key in transgressive learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2016; Chaves et al., 2017).

From these four dimensions, two axes emerge: community and disruption. Community is about forging authentic connections based on diversity; these connections converge to collectively manifest a vision that reflects the collective achieved agency. Disruption is about change, where 'internal disruption' is about the possibility to diverge from the idea of 'normal' in spaces that celebrate diversity instead of forcing an undynamic form of convergence. 'External disruption' is about change brought about in wider societal structures through the practice of community itself. The presence of both disruption as well as community balances a PBTL process. Disruption involves friction, dissonance and possibly conflict, while the axis of community allows for recalibration, new relationships and continuous evolvement through new constellations.

Methodology

After an extensive phase of orientation, three communities were identified for the study: two in Finland and one in Portugal. Apart from pragmatic reasons for selecting communities (including language, accessibility and willingness to participate in the research), we looked for diversity in character between the communities, openness to, and integration with, the 'outside' world and dedication to a vision of transformation.

Väinölä, a theosophical community located in central Finland, was founded in 1978. Its inhabitants are mostly above 50 years old; no children currently live in the community. All members have a Finnish nationality. Väinölä was created to put the theosophical idea of 'brotherhood', living together with others without violence, into practice.

Kurjen Tila is a relatively new community in central Finland, initially established around a biodynamic farm. Kurjen Tila was found by families who wished to live in the countryside yet in a social context. With one exception, all members are originally from Finland. Apart from permanent members, a new group of volunteers from all over Europe joins the community every year.

As both Finnish communities are relatively small (fewer than 40 members), the Portuguese community of 'Tamera' was selected as it is one of the largest eco- villages in Europe in the Global Ecovillages Network (GEN). The community was created in 1995 by its three German founders holding a strong vision of a peaceful culture based on love and non-violence in all areas of life (Duhm, 2015). Tamera has around 200 permanent members of all ages, as well as hundreds of visitors every year. Members and visitors are from all nationalities, religions and cultures, al- though a large share of its members is of German origin. Community members live in smaller sub-groups organized around a particular work domain such as (solar) technology, permaculture and artistic and creative work. Tamera has an influential and inspirational role in the European network and proliferates itself as a 'Peace Research and Education Centre.'

Research Methods
The research followed an ethnographic approach (see for example Dewan, 2018) combining life-story interviews with photovoice sessions. The main researcher (Pisters, S.R.) paid multiple visits (of several weeks) to all three communities over the course of two years (spring 2017–spring 2019). In the Finnish ecovillages, the researcher joined daily life in the community, conducted life-story interviews and organized photovoice sessions. Due to the significantly larger scope of Tamera and the limits set by the community, the time and scope of the research conducted in Portugal was more limited. The researcher spent one month as a guest participating in several courses in Tamara, allowing for experiencing the community and getting acquainted with some of its members. Life-story interviews were conducted a year later on a return visit.

Nineteen life-story interviews were conducted, seven from Kurjen Tila, six from Väinölä and six from Tamera. Sampling of community members was done in a pragmatic manner. As the interviews required time and willingness to speak about personal matters, a more structured selection procedure was not deemed suitable, even though there was a general aim to keep a balance in age, gender and, when applicable, different nationalities. Some members were personally approached by the main re- searcher or by the contact person in the community, while others subscribed to a list after an invitation email and introductory meeting.

The semi-structured interviews took the form of dialogues between researcher and members. Themes that were discussed included community members' general feelings about the community project, their first experiences in the community, difficult moments, decisive moments leading to their commitment to stay and lessons learned during their time in community.

Photovoice is a method that uses photographs to elicit stories of participants by discussing the meanings behind photographs taken by participants. Photovoice generally has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to invite critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large and small group discussion of the photographs and (3) to enable communities to reach policymakers (Wang, 1999). This research focused on the first two goals.

Participants were asked to take photographs that represented (1) a meaningful moment, (2) a difficult moment, (3) something they were proud of, (4) a favourite place and (5) the purpose of their life in the community (one photo per theme). These pictures were discussed in participatory focus group sessions[1]. The aim of the group sessions was to elicit the stories behind the pictures, evoking accounts of meaningful aspects of community life as well as its challenges. Participants were therefore given the space to decide what they would like to tell each other and/or the researcher; as such, they were given power to decide what topics were important to talk about (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000).

Recordings of both life-story interviews and stories and dialogues that unfolded during the photovoice sessions were transcribed and analysed using the data analysis software DEDOOSE[2] and analysed as 'narratives' (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Smith, 2000)[3]. A thematic analysis (Riessman, 2002) was used both to analyse the life-stories and the photo induced narratives. The analysis focused on finding 'significant life experiences (SLE)' (Howell & Allen, 2016): memories that play a conscious role in individuals' and groups' accounts of meaningful experiences. The narratives have been mainly analysed vertically (at the community level); they have also been analysed horizontally to find common themes between participants. These SLE's were coded using the themes and

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1   In total six focus groups were organized: two groups of four participants each in Va¨ino¨ la¨ and four groups in Kurjen Tila (two with permanent inhabitants – three and five participants, respectively; one with long-term volunteers including six participants; and one private session with a couple).
2   Dedoose is a web application for mixed methods research developed by academics from UCLA, with support from the William T. Grant Foundation, and is the successor to EthnoNotes.
3   This research did not treat the photographs themselves as data but focused on the meanings attributed to the photographs. However, some pictures have been included in the results section as 'visual stimuli' adding a sensory dimension to the results.

subthemes of the initial theoretical framework (Pisters et al., 2019) as codes, and adding on to these when necessary.

The methodology for this research has been reviewed and approved by the Natural Resource Institute Finland (Luonnonvarakeskus [Luke]), where the main researcher worked at the time this research was conducted. The research proposal has been re- viewed in accordance with the ethical principles of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity which are committees whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from any harm.

Results

The quality of being emplaced (from the dimension connection to place) is reflected in the empirical material in four ways. Firstly, in all three communities the non-human was regarded as an inherent part of community life. Nature was considered a source of wellbeing: 'The soul rests when looking at this scenery' (KT_PV_3)[4]. The community of Kurjen Tila aspires to offer institutionalized 'Green Care' for people with mental or physical challenges. As one participant mentioned, enjoying the beautiful view of the fields is already a form of 'green care' (KT_PV_2). Being more in nature and in contact with producing and consuming healthy food also served as an inspiration for healthier living (KT_PV_4). For one of the volunteers, the months in the community in a country like Finland, where nature is all around, embodied a kind of living that is 'healthy and stress free, or at least less stressful.' Many pictures of the view of the natural scenery around or close to the community were shared by volunteers as favourite places or favourite moments (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7. View of the fields (KT_PV_1).

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4   KT= Kurjent Tila, V = Väinölä, T = Tamera, PV = photovoice
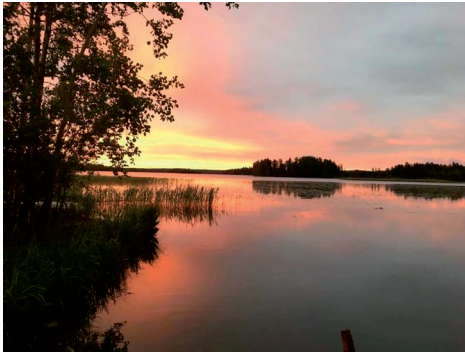
Figure 8. View of the lake (KT_PV_4).

Nature was also perceived as a caretaker of the community in providing an abundance of water and food in response to being cared for by the human community (Figure 9). For example, members describe 'caring for the soil' (KT_3) or creating space for water to return to the deserted landscape and witnessing how nature responds in abundance (T_2). Furthermore, for many members, the non-human is perceived as not just 'matter' but as animated and spiritual (more-than-human).

Figure 9. Water in the once deserted landscape of Tamera.

Secondly, being emplaced was reflected in re-connecting to a (lost) sense of community, including both the human aspect (by being part of a 'tribe') as well as the non-human aspect (in the experience of being part of natural cycles). One community member (T_5) contemplated whether certain 'sustainable' practices like buying organic tomatoes in a supermarket reflect a bigger longing to be more connected to natural cycles of life.

Similarly, the renewed interest in spiritual practices and personal development might reflect a deeper longing for a different kind of world and for community. For him, Tamera is a place where visitors who come for just one particular reason are invited to place this issue in a bigger social, ecological and political picture.

Third, the quality of being emplaced was reflected in experiencing the physical grounds of the community as a place imbued with meaning. Choosing the geographical location of Tamera was considered, for example, to have been a spiritual or intuitive choice (T_6). Another participant describes the influence of non-human aspects on the energy of a place, 'The apple trees bring in their own feeling, they are already so old, because of them the apple garden feels like a living room to meet others and meditate'. (V_PV_1) (Figure 10)

Figure 10. Apple trees in the garden. (V_PV_1).

In all communities, participants mention the value and meaning of spaces to retreat in solitude to as well as spaces to meet each other in. This reflects the qualities of being both distanced and (re)connected. Sometimes, however, the meaning of a certain place does not correspond to the current reality of participants. For example, one participant described how communal places that used to reflect togetherness now feel like unapproachable

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territory due to a major conflict she experienced in the community (KT_PV_1, Figure 11).

Figure 11. View of communal area. (KT_PV_1).

The last reflection of being emplaced concerns the ways in which communities physically shape their place through creative practices, including building, farming and landscape design. These practices often arise from being critical and embodying acts of transgression. These are discussed under the dimension of creativity.

Cornering emplaced are the qualities being compliant and content, which represent a sense of stability, at times even stagnation. One member from Väinölä reflects on how it is difficult for her as someone from the younger generation to ignite change (V_3). Not many new relationships are formed and the future of the community is uncertain. 'I will probably be the caretaker of 25 elders' she jokes, then adds, 'We don't know what the future will bring' (V_3). As the community has been established now for 40 years, members have engrained habits and life routines, which are difficult to change (V_5). This does, now and then, lead to some tension between different community members. In

the absence of a strong visionary and spiritual leader, 'There might be more differences in how people think this work should be done and how to develop' (V_5). This shows how being divergent can challenge being compliant and content. Another member speculates about the reasons for which younger people rarely join the community. He feels it is hard for young people to enter because 'This way of living is quite hard' and as he says, 'does nothing to satisfy one's egoistic desires' (V_4). Furthermore, he feels, they lack the kind of fiery leadership that their initial visionary leader had. Similarly, in Kurjen Tila tension arose from a conflict between the initial vision and new input, demonstrating the potential disruptive impact of challenging a state of being compliant and content (K_4) by being critical. The community did not have clear, built-in structures to navigate conflictual situations nor prior experience, which led to an escalation of the situation and affected the wellbeing of its members (KT_PV_3). One participant in particular felt the community had missed the opportunity to work through this conflict as a community: 'In my experience we did not try to solve it when it was still possible. We totally lost that opportunity because there were some people who did not want to do it in time and then it was too late' (KT_PV_3). Participants mentioned that indeed individual learning had occurred, but not so much learning at the community level (KT_PV_3).

Triggered by the conflictual situation, some of the members of Kurjen Tila reached out to national and international networks, reflecting the quality of being distanced. The tension field between being emplaced and distanced is essentially about the balance between focussing on internal community dynamics and connecting to the world outside by taking in visitors, connecting to networks, becoming involved in local and global politics and connecting and collaborating with other places. According to one of the members from Kurjen Tila, being part of a community learning project among nine European National Ecovillage Networks is 'really empowering'[5] on a personal level. The community is also working with an external facilitator in collaboration with the Finnish ecovillage network (SKEY)[6].

Another theme concerning the quality of being distanced is the connection to the wider environment in which the community is located. In Tamera, for example, the community consisted initially of mostly German members; developing connections with its Portuguese environment only became a priority in later years (see also Esteves, 2017). One Portuguese member explains: 'We were very few non-Germans at the time; there were just a few of us and we were all a bit forgotten. It was not easy for me. I felt there was a missing link to the roots of where we were in the region' (T_4). The community invited this member to become their Portuguese liaison with the local, regional and

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5   Tekst message from KT_5 (15.4.2020).
6   These developments took place after field work for this research was officially finished. We thus do not have in depth information on how this process is unfolding.

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national (political) environment. As a result, Tamera changed drastically in its connections with the external world. As the Portuguese liaison explains, 'You cannot compare today's community with the Tamera I met 12 years ago.' Apart from being better integrated in its environment, Tamera also started to focus more on the ecological part of their vision. This more tangible and ecological work helped to develop relationships with the Portuguese population and attract more Portuguese visitors who were interested in learning how this community turned a piece of deserted land into a fertile, green area (T_4). Another member reflects on how a 3-week pilgrimage through the country motivated her to learn about the land and its inhabitants: *''I saw so many things that I did not see before when I just drove through the country. I felt so much love for the people there – so much appreciation for how they live and how they try to maintain their life. And at the same time, I felt the pain of the country, of the land … I want to be part of this country more and to see how the knowledge that is being gathered in Tamera can help to improve the situation of the people in Portugal''* (T_6).

This account reflects the qualities of being re-connected as well as being emplaced. Reconnecting in a compassionate way is essential for establishing the deep relations that are needed to function well in community. This requires both individual inner work (Pisters et al., 2020) as well as 'social' inner work in collective spaces. In Tamera, the social and inner work required to build a functioning community of 'trust' is the core of their project. *''In our daily life together, it is the very simple things – such as an unfulfilled need for contact, a striving for dominance, competition for love and sex, jealousy, unconscious negative projections, the fear of being judged – that have destroyed groups from the inside in hundreds of community projects since the sixties''* (Dregger, 2015, p. 110).

According to Tamera's philosophy, and moving beyond the community level, deeply ingrained negative structures and conflicts in our personal love and sexual relationships translate into violent collective structures (Dregger, 2015; Duhm, 2015). Such issues cannot be solved only by individual inner work. For this reason, Tamera intensively works with these topics at the community level and even beyond in their educational programs for guests, using a variety of tools and approaches they have experimented with over the years. The community of Väinölä also emphasizes the inner work that is needed in order to keep social community relationships functional. When faced with challenges in community life, it is necessary to turn inwards. As one participant mentions, 'I know the difficulties are inside of me' (V_6), reflecting the quality of being disconnected as an inherent part of compassionate connection (Figure 12).
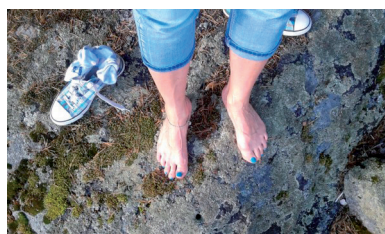
Figure 12. Symbolizing the necessity to turn inwards 'standing on your own feet. (V_PV_2).

Another participant describes that, for her, working with body-centred practices, including working with horses, helps her cultivate the qualities of unselfishness, love and wisdom of the heart, which are needed for community life: 'The mind can invent things that are not really so clear; on the contrary, if you manage to open you heart, what comes from it is clearer and more authentic' (V_3, Figure 13).

Figure 13. Symbolizing an open heart as a result of body-centred practices. (V_PV_2).

Another type of compassionate connection concerns the relationship and collaboration with the more-than-human world (Harmin et al., 2017). One member of Tamera describes the spiritual dimension of this relationship by recalling an experience she had during a workshop on finding ways to communicate with the spiritual and natural world. During the workshop, they visited the site where a huge dam construction was planned, for which disastrous environmental impacts were foreseen, and the subject of large demonstrations. 'We went there to see what the message of the wildlife was – the message of nature. And I received very strong messages' (T_4). She recalls it was easy for her to get into a meditative state where she was able to receive these messages because she had an already-established meditation practice.

Being divergent, from the dimension of creativity, cornered with being critical from transgression, is reflected in practices that embody an alternative perspective, ontology or worldview and a critique of hegemonic structures and practices that sustain these. An example from Tamera is their critique of technological innovation driven by economic optimization (Sareen et al., 2018). Tamera aims to find *''a technological paradigm in which we are co-operating with life instead of trying to get profits''* (T_3). If you try to develop a technological system that fits into the existing capitalist paradigm, this member argues, you end up exploiting life rather than supporting and co-operating with it. A different approach does require, according to him, a functioning community of trust because *'If you have a technology that brings life and joy and does not degrade the surroundings but costs three times as much as an alternative, you might as well not bother'* (in a capitalist environment).

Tamera has successfully manifested this vision in the 'solar village', a test field for developing technology for decentralized energy supply with the aim of achieving energy autonomy (Dregger, 2015, pp. 50–75; Sareen et al., 2018). 'Living with technology' is an essential part of their approach. It allows for a direct experience of the impact of technology on daily life as well as the learning process of embedding new technology in a community (Dregger, 2015, p. 59).

Being convergent is about creating things together while compassionately relating to other beings. The most straightforward example of being convergent concerns communal projects and the value of doing things together. One participant recalls the value of building a compost shed together with some of the volunteers. *"If time for talking with each other is also valued as part of a work process, something more than the mere constructing of a compost shed occurs: a meaningful encounter between a group of people has taken place"* (KT_PV_1). Similarly, another participant shared how a simple task like repairing the sauna can become something 'nice and comfortable' when doing it together (KT_PV_2). In fact, some perceive a lack of communal projects to be a problem. Even though there is a lot of creative work going on in the community, most of the time this involves everyone working on his/her own individual project (KT_PV_1, Figure 14).

Figure 14. The communal compost shed. (KT_PV_1).

The quality of being divergent is key to a healthy and dynamic kind of convergence in that it evades exclusion and narrow-mindedness. The integration of long- or short- term visitors in the community of Kurjen Tila, for example, reflects the quality of being divergent as it is brought into the collective. The presence of long-term volunteers from different European countries is generally perceived as very positive and enriching, especially given that the Finnish countryside is not a particularly diverse and international environment. The presence of these volunteers not only influences the immediate community, but has a wider impact. One community member mentioned that she is happy that Kurjen Tila is a place where her children come into contact with people from outside of Finland[7].

A first example of bringing the quality of being divergent into that of being convergent is including non-human beings in the creative process of shaping a community. Tamera dedicated an area of six-hectares to research how to communicate with animals, plants and unseen beings [8]. They used, for example, group meditation to learn the language of an old oak tree: *We trained in it for a long time. Using group meditation, we wrote down what everyone perceived during the meditation. In the beginning, one perceived this, the other this. After some time, however, everyone in the group started to perceive the same things; we had learned the language of the tree. You need to trust your own perception and the perception of the tree[9].*

Another related example from Tamera concerns the manner in which a diversity of cultural and spiritual inspirations is brought into the community and converges into new rituals (Figure 10): 'We do learn a lot from indigenous peoples. But we are not Colombians or Aboriginals, we have to find our own way, find our own rituals.'[10]

<div style="text-align: right">Chapter 6</div>

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7   Field notes
8   See https://www.tamera.org/terra-deva/# (accessed 23-4-2020) for more information.
9   Field notes from a guided tour in Terra Deva, the place for spiritual ecology research in Tamera, September 2017.
10   Ibid
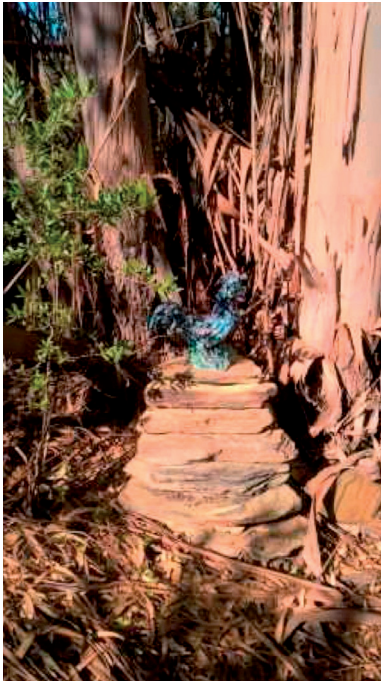
Figure 15. Statue of a rooster in Terra Deva, Tamera

An example of failing to bring the quality of being divergent into that of being convergent is found in hierarchical (rather than democratic) decision-making processes. As one member from Kurjen Tila mentioned, even though the community appears to use democratic decision-making, in reality there is a quite clear, be it informal, hierarchy in decision-making processes; this results in some people making decisions without integrating diverse perspectives (KT_4).

Discussion and Conclusion

The results reflect the co-existence of the two axes of community and disruption intersecting the four-dimensional framework of PBTL. More specifically, the com- bination of these two axes involves embodying transgressive structures that are characterized by an energy of change and by episodes of disruption, while at the same time integrating a sense of stability through being emplaced in a specific environment and social structure. Doing things in a different way from a 'community intelligence' perspective may lead, in and of itself, to transgressive disruption of (for example) competition and economic incentives, as we have discussed in the example of technological design in Tamera. Differently, long-existing structures may sometimes block this process, be they on a structural/external

level or on an individual/internal level, and need to be overcome. Examples of such challenges reflected in the results include hierarchical decision-making, male dominance, competition, jealousy and a culture of economic productivity. The analysis of more structural and institutional influences was beyond the scope of this research but needs to be considered to understand the potential and the challenges of initiatives like ecovillages. A pressing example is the pre- dominant 'whiteness' of members of sustainability networks (Ferguson & Lovell, 2015) and the inability of many ecovillages to meaningfully address racial and class inequities (Chitewere, 2010). This has implications for how to judge the quality of being divergent.

Transgressive Creativity and Transformation in Consciousness

The results show how a community structure can facilitate political-economic re-positioning towards dominant markets and technology by transgressive creative practices including community-supported agriculture, or, as in Tamera, technological design in renewable energy. As discussed, Tamera's Solar Village is based on sup- porting life instead of an economic logic, thereby disconnecting creativity from commercial viability. This allows for creativity to be linked to wisdom, distinguishing between ideas and innovations that will have positive social, ecological and political effects and those that won't (Feldman, 2008). Cultivating this sense of wisdom might require a different state of consciousness. As Frawley (2006, p. 182) argues, 'The consciousness that we have developed as a civilization …is inadequate to handle the complex technologies that we have produced or to enable us to apply them in harmony with the greater life around us.' The findings in this paper support the argument that a transition to sustainable societies may only succeed through major transformations both at personal and collective levels (Kunze & Woiwode, 2018). This is not a new perspective; integral philosophy texts have long acknowledged the necessity of a transformation in human consciousness to sustain and elevate life on earth[11].11 This requires transcending human-nature dualisms and re-evaluating the meaning of human life. In doing so, the project of sustainability, with its aim to also sustain our own human life, is justified (Abram, 2017; Orr, 2002).

Transgression, Conflict and Community

Disruption, as we have seen in the results, can lead to conflict and separation if a group of people is not able to harness the potential of disagreement and hold the temporary chaos that comes with it. Diverse viewpoints, however, do 'bring into focus and explore the strengths and weaknesses of attitudes, assumptions, and plans' (Butler & Rothstein, 1987, p. 37). The art of community then lies in creating spaces that welcome, nurture and support disagreement without hostility and fear (ibid). Learning how to do this as a community is a process and often requires the wider support and knowledge of networks

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11   For example, in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo.

and allies, reflected by the current situation in Kurjen Tila and confirmed by Kirby (2003) and the presence of organizations that have as purpose to support conflict management situations, decision-making and facilitating group processes.

The vision of a community project can be a point of disagreement and conflict when it is challenged by newcomers, as shown in this paper. Alfred and Joubert (2007) argue that the vision that unites the community can initially not be held between more than three people. If an idea is shared too early with too many people, it may lose its coherence and strength, risking chaos in a community project. Together with people who feel connected to the initial vision and with whom a common higher goal is shared, community is about continuously re-creating a vision: 'Visioning is an ongoing process of focussing intention, which will never be completed' (Alfred & Joubert, 2007, p. 23). This shows the intricate balance between space for being divergent and critical in a community and the need to maintain the core of its vision intact in order to ensure its longevity and stability.

Bringing Compassion into Transgression

Disruption and dissonance are part of a process of transgression (Wals & Peters, 2017). To successfully move through a transgressive phase, however, there is a need to bring compassion into transgression. Dissonance, disruption and conflict can lead to more violence and separation if they are not met with compassion and the right tools to navigate these spaces of transgression. The website of the community learning incubator CLIPS [12] states that successfully facilitating community projects asks for 'an attitude of empathetic benevolent curiosity' about the human being in general, and about every participant in the concrete group situation[13]. Azriel Cohen (2014), artist and intercultural facilitator, argues that many groups fail because they dive into painful issues before establishing this sense of group stability. 'When the balance is restored' however, 'it will be much easier to touch the pain.'[14] This also shows how com- passionate connection, is needed in processes of conflict and transgression.

Another way to bring compassion into potentially disruptive community processes is linked to the quality of being disconnected. Von Lüpke (2014, in Joubert & Alfred, 2014) argues that communities need grown up, responsible people that are aware of their own potential instead of people who pursue life in a community as an answer to their personal problems. According to Von Lüpke, this kind of attitude or expectation often leads to crises in communities, or worse, to the collapse of the community. According to him, the solution of rendering a community sustainable lies in a simple paradox: members of

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12   https://clips.gen-europe.org accessed 18-3-2021
13   For more information see https://clips.gen-europe.org/facilitation/-, accessed 22-4-2020.
14   Dharma Talk Thich Nhat Hanh, 1994: https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/archive/tag/flower+watering

it at times need to retreat alone. This perspective reflects the vision of Väinölä members, when faced with a difficulty, have learned to turn inwards.

Lastly, the communities themselves are also places in which members, to a certain extent, become disconnected from mainstream society. From there, they become re- connected to the world. As Sargisson (2007, p. 398) points out, ecovillage members are, on the one hand, often attuned to opening themselves spiritually and socially. On the other hand, to sustain their identity and purpose as a group, they need to maintain a social, ideological and normative distance to the surrounding society, which she refers to as 'estrangement' (Sargisson, 2007; Westskog et al., 2018).

In conclusion, despite the relatively small number of communities and cases analysed, this paper has contributed to sharpen the anatomy of place-based transformative (including transgressive) learning in sustainability initiatives, and valorised the process as described in our theoretical framework. It shows how community and disruption are two axes of PBTL in sustainability initiatives. The results reflect how a change in inner consciousness is related to alternative practices that re-define relationships with other humans, the more-than-human world and ourselves.

Future research can deepen the understanding of PBTL by unravelling socio-economic structures that enable or block inclusion in such learning processes. This in itself is part of PBTL and is about awareness of whose perspectives (being divergent) and whose opinions (being critical) are being excluded and included and how these affect sustainability initiatives. Issues to be addressed include the balance between forming a group of like-minded people and inviting diversity, as well as the potential of diversity within a community versus diversity of communities collaborating and supporting each other.

Chapter 6

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Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Research as product of, and portal to, self-transformation?

An auto-ethnographic account of my research with ecovillages

"It's not possible to engage with a system without also addressing the self."
Kenneth Hogg

Introduction

Do we choose our research or does our research choose us? This is a question I have been asking myself because of the way my research project on transformative learning with ecovillages seemed to fit so seemingly perfect into my personal life journey. According to me, this research, in its particular shape and form, would not be here if it weren't for some of my personal learning experiences prior to it. This research can therefore be understood as a product of a process of self-transformation. At the same time, the research process was also a portal to the continuation of this process of self-transformation by offering new experiences and ample space for theoretical reflection and self-reflection. Furthermore, as this research explored ecovillages as spaces of transformative learning, it seemed a missed opportunity to not also explore the potential transformative impact of visiting ecovillages on me as a person and as a researcher. It is this mutual, threefold relationship between research and self-transformation that I will explore in this chapter, centred around the question if and how this research can be understood as a product of, as well as a portal to, self-transformation.

Researchers rarely address their own transformative experience when doing research nor do they see research itself as a space of transformation (Ives, Freeth, and Fischer 2020). As Adler and Adler (1987) already suggested, traditional research has been inhibited by only focusing on studying the other rather than researchers themselves. This is a missed opportunity, as the research process itself can be a profound learning process for the researcher as well, one that has the potential to transform a researcher's perspectives on certain topics, their values and perhaps even their worldview and consciousness. As Walker (Walker 2017: 1905) argues, '*by connecting personal life stories with inquiry, autobiographical research has the potential to transform the learning, values, and identities of individuals, institutions, and greater society*'. To complement my research on place-based transformative learning in ecovillages, for which I engaged with the learning processes with and amongst community members, I will turn towards my own learning process as a researcher in this chapter. Although this was not planned, I realized that my personal learning process showed signs of transformation that were often very much alike those shared by the community members participating in this research. In earlier work (Pisters et al. 2022; Pisters, Vihinen, and Figueiredo 2019, 2020) we explored both more individually oriented learning processes as well as more communal oriented learning process and focused on the relational nature of these learning process. This gives rise to an understanding of sustainability as relational process in which inner/outer, human/nonhuman, material/social and local/global are mutually constituted. For this research I conducted life-story interviews with community members of three ecovillages and organized participatory photovoice sessions. These methods gave me insights into inner and social learning that accompanies a choice for, and commitment to, life in an ecovillage.

As the topic of this research had emerged from my own interests and experiences, the themes and stories that came up during the interviews and photovoice sessions were often closely related to my own experiences or triggered me to ponder how certain themes were reflected in my own life, thinking and perception. Like all meaningful work, conducting this research contributed to my own personal and professional development. The questions explored in this research are however, meaningful on a more-than personal level as they concern the central dilemma's in the transition towards more sustainable societies and /or in dealing with the impact ecological and social injustices present in our current day world.

Autobiographical research creates the space to convey internalized memories (Smorti 2011) which makes visible cultural artefacts as well as systems of privilege and bias (Berryman 1999). If met with counter narratives, insight and knowledge, autobiographical research can serve to deconstruct mainstream 'testaments of knowledge' that have influenced the development of a researchers' identity, and hence unravel if and how interacting with these counter narratives triggers learning and transformation (Walker 2017). In autobiographical/ethnographical research, researchers connect their lived experience with learning to deconstruct their own paradigms of knowledge (Anderson 2001). Auto-ethnography is thus strongly rooted in self-reflection, an aspect of doing research that has long been undervalued but is gaining more visibility (see e.g. Horlings et al. 2020). When self-reflection is combined with a solid and critical theoretical lens in order to place self-reflective accounts in relation to broader paradigms and discourses and trends, self-reflection can be expanded into auto-ethnographic inquiry. Auto-ethnographic research can serve as a method in itself focusing on deconstructing a researchers' identity and learning as a result of conducting research. However, critical self-reflection put into the theoretical context of the research conducted, can also have a profound impact on the research process itself: the questions asked, the methods chosen, the theoretical directions taken, the interaction with people and places participating in the research and the interpretation of gathered material.

A powerful autobiographical account from a researcher that inspired me to write this chapter, is the story of Felix Rauschmayer (2017), an environmental researcher with a background in agronomics and economics who wrote about how his view of 'sustainability' changed in the wake of terminal cancer. He starts by arguing that essentially, it remains unclear whether all the talk and education about sustainable development has actually increased people's care for future generations and the natural world. 'It is far from evident', Rauschmayer (2017:1) argues, 'that justice towards future generations or the state of nature has improved'. He continues by arguing that according to him this is because there is a lack of acknowledging and understanding the complexity of sustainability issues as well as a lack of understanding its root causes, which according to him lie in

unsustainable mindsets. The need for a change in mindsets has been acknowledged by different institutions (Meadows 1999; Nakicenovic and Schulz 2011; UNEP 2012) however not many ideas are shared on how to bring about such changes of mindsets or values, Rauschmayer (2017) argues. He continues by arguing that the most 'intimate' part of mindsets that require change is our view of ourselves and the world, more specifically from an understanding of separation to an understanding of inter-being. Transitioning to such a new understanding, he argues, 'cannot be a merely academic, and even less a merely political endeavour; it rather is a deep personal transformation that is required for this move' (ibid:1).

As Rauschmayer (2017) continues, he argues that some of the roles Wittmayer and Schapke (2014)identify in action research in transition studies, will help researchers to come closer to addressing shifting worldviews in transition processes. The roles include reflective scientist, knowledge broker, process facilitator, change agent and self-reflective scientist. However, a conceptual understanding of these roles is not enough according to Rauschmayer (2017), to address these roles, researchers need a certain level of first-hand experience with, and reflection upon, their own shifts in mindsets and how that relates to their own behaviour, culture and systemic roles. There is thus a need for researchers to experience and reflect upon their own roles, mindsets and possible shifts in them throughout a research project. This is acknowledged in Horlings et al. (2020) in which we argued that the engagement of a researcher with the people and places they research can have a transformative impact on mindsets and values of the researcher. Embodying different kinds of roles within a research process requires engaging in research as an 'embodied researcher', by inviting not just the mind to join the process, but also the (metaphorical) heart, hands and feet (ibid). As such, the process of doing research is in itself a meaningful and potentially transformative aspect of research. We need to keep in mind though, that without certain people or experiences that invite us to take an honest look in the mirror as individuals and as institutions, we can stay stuck in a state of cognitive dissonance, denial or a limbo between different interests and influences of power. Besides, it might not always be easy to effectively link a shift in mindset to observable actions and changes in the systems and organizations we are part of. Most of us are still 'trapped' in a dysfunctional system that we aim to change but also depend on. We pay taxes that might or might not be put to 'good' use, we need to have insurance and can not always choose our insurance company based on our personal values, we need housing and not all of us have the resources, capacities or opportunities to organize housing off grid, we need an income to cover our basic living needs and so forth. The relevant question to ask here might be something along the lines of what I recently heard researcher Brene Brown state in her conversation with the two researchers Megan Reitz and John Higgins around 'employee activism' (Brown 2022). We need to strike a balance between voicing our concerns and values, demanding change and accountability in our

organizations on the one hand and the consequences that might follow from that on the other hand. Speak too 'softly' and your intention to change things might not be noticed or taken up, speak too loud and the system will 'spit you out', which might negatively influence your power to change it, according to these researchers (ibid).

In this chapter I reflect upon my personal learning journey which started a few years before I started researching ecovillages and, in my perspective, led to and shaped this research profoundly. Furthermore, this learning processes continued throughout the research process through interactions with (theoretical) literature, other researchers as well as the people and places I visited while doing fieldwork.

Methodology & theoretical framework

This chapter is based upon retrospective auto-ethnography (Tilley-Lubbs 2009), where autoethnography is understood as a mix of "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis 2004: xix). Some examples of (related) autoethnographic studies include a critical autoethnography of a doctoral student's research journey (Lynch and Kuntz 2019), a paper reflecting on the journeys of peace pilgrimages (Tamashiro 2018), a 'transformative' autoethnographic account of an adult educator unravelling the implications of cultural identity on learners (Sykes 2013) and one study mentions the value of 'collaborative' autoethnography as a pathway for transformative learning (Blalock and Akehi 2017). The style used in this chapter reflects analytic autoethnography, which intends to gain a cultural understanding of self that is intimately related to others in society (Holstein, Marvasti, and Mckinney 2021). It aims to go beyond sharing autobiographical fieldnotes to providing an interpretation and analysis of them in relation to the theoretical development process and empirical research throughout my research. Since I felt that some of my personal experiences prior to and during the research influenced the direction I have taken in this research, theoretically as well as empirically. Furthermore, significant experiences during the research have strengthened me personally and, potentially also as researcher. In this chapter I attempt to gain a better understanding of how these experiences from before and during the research have influenced me as a person, me as a researcher and the research process.

A secondary purpose of this chapter is simply to share my personal learning experiences during the years I researched transformative learning in ecovillages as I realized at multiple occasions that my story is not uniquely 'mine': it also reflects experiences that are shared among many more young, white, heterosexual women from the global North who are on a search for an authentic and sustainable way of life. Herein also lies one of the

values of autoethnographic research: shedding light on a societal process through the lens of personal experience. This strongly relates to the philosophy of the people living in one of the participating communities of this research, Tamera, who argue that what we consider to be 'personal' inevitably also reflects the political (Duhm 2015; Harnish 2000). Furthermore, I write this chapter partly as a kind of tribute to all the community members who shared their personal life stories with me, it feels like an act of respect to also share parts of mine. As formulated by (2011: 406), *I became convinced that in order to hold carefully the stories of adolescent females—stories about death, race, gender, bodies, God—I had to tell carefully some of the stories of my own experience'*. Sharing only within this research community does not do justice however to the value of my experiences and learning as a result of my stay in the communities. The insights I have gained can contribute to our collective search for answers to some of the most pressing questions of our times: how can we change our ways of living in order to survive and thrive as a human race in harmony with all that is not human. This resonates, I believe, with ecovillages' *raison d'etre*, of which part is to educate, be examples of, and embody, an alternative model for living on this planet, to be of inspiration to visitors. I have been a visitor of those places and seeing, perceiving and experiencing these places has left its traces in me. In this chapter I want to explore what kind of traces these places left in me but also what led me to these places, which requires looking a bit at the time prior to this research.

Auto-ethnography was never really the plan of this research so (unfortunately) I did not take any measures prospectively to facilitate an auto-ethnographic analysis. Hence, a 'retrospective' auto-ethnographic approach is taken for this chapter. I did have some fieldnotes, which I weaved into my retrospective memories. Apart from retrospective accounts of my experience as a researcher, I also wrote down the narrative of the learning experiences I have had in the years prior to this research that seem to me, looking back, to have been pivotal in leading me to this research and in the way I have approached and shaped it. The data used for this chapter thus consists of memories in combination with fieldnotes. Memories from before the research are indicated as (m_0), memories of the research process with (m_1) or (m_2). I wrote out these memories in June-August 2020. Accounts based on fieldnotes are indicated as 'fieldnotes'. Besides these auto-ethnographic 'data' sources, I also now and then include memories that arose in me while writing this chapter and reflected upon my written down memories. It is in the nature of memories that remembering one triggers the remembrance of others, while engaging with aspects of past experience, different memories arise again. In the words of Rubin (1996: 11), 'autobiographical memories are constructions that come into being as they are told', or written, either to oneself, or others, I would add. Writer Herman Koch (2020) acknowledges this as well in his autobiographical novel 'Finse dagen', *'al schrijvend komt het ene detail na het andere bovendrijven, details waarvan je dacht dat je ze allang was vergeten. Het geheugen is een bevroren bergmeer waar je een gat in hakt. Uit*

dat gat haal je vervolgens de ene na de andere vis naar boven. Wie geen gat hakt zal ook niets vangen.' (English translation: 'As you write, one detail after another arises, details you thought you had long forgotten. Our memory is like a frozen mountain lake in which you cut a hole. From that hole you catch one fish after another. If you don't cut a hole in the ice you won't catch anything either.'

I used the theoretical framework that came presented in chapter 5 of this thesis to analyse these autobiographical fieldnotes and memories. I coded them using the different dimensions and themes in the framework as main codes and developed sub codes while going through the data.

A visual of the theoretical framework used to analyse and present the findings can be found below (figure 16). This framework emerged from a literature study and empirical research (Pisters et al. 2019, 2020).
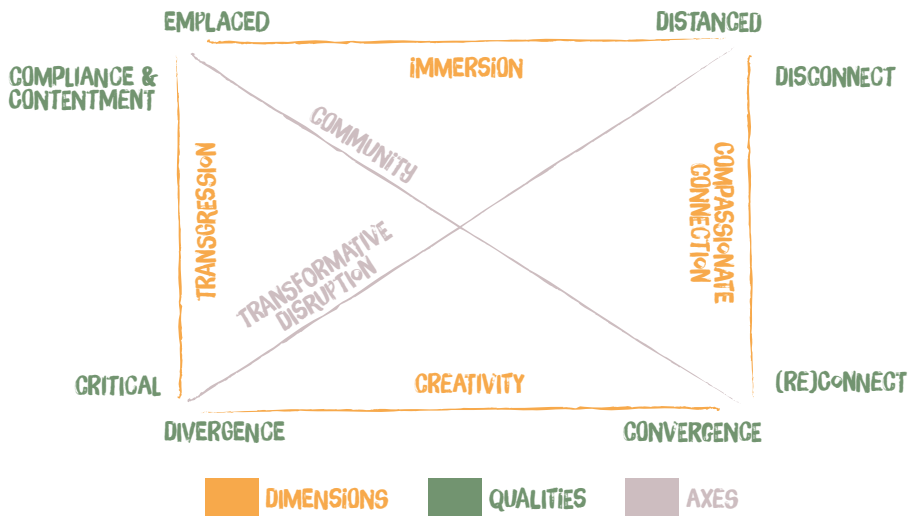
Figure 16. A four-dimensional impression of PBTL from Pisters et al. (2022)

As can be seen, the framework is based upon four dimensions, where each dimension is characterized by two oppositional qualities. Each quality, corners with a matching quality from the adjacent dimension.

Immersion is about being immersed in our immediate physical environment, including our own bodies while at the same time being conscious of the innate connectivity with more distant people and places, reflecting a relational understanding of places. The

dimension of immersion comes with the quality to be emplaced in one's immediate environment (local) while being able to also take a distance to connect to the bigger picture and the broader environment (regional–global). The quality of being emplaced in one's immediate environment comes with the quality of 'compliance and contentment' from the dimension 'transgression'. This refers to being compliant with a basic set of guidelines and rules that allow a community to function on a daily basis as well as cultivating a sense of contentment with one's current situation, even if it is not yet the envisioned ideal that a person or community is working towards. This corner thus represents a sense of stability. The opposite quality is 'critical', cornering with the quality of 'divergence' from the dimension 'creativity'. This corner represents the space for voicing critique, maintaining a critical perspective and integrating diverse points of views, ideas and approaches. A diversity of ideas, perspectives, experiences and inputs is a source of creativity. The opposite quality of divergence is 'convergence' where different ideas, perspectives and people are brought together. Combined with the quality to 'reconnect' from the dimension 'compassionate connection', this corner represents the space for creating new things together. Opposite of 'reconnect' is the quality to 'disconnect', retreat, spent time alone, cultivate compassion for oneself and have time for self-reflection and rest. Cornering with the quality to take 'distance' from one's immediate environment now and then, this corner is a space to reflect, retreat, rest and recalibrate. From these four corners, two axes arise. The axe of community connects the corner of stability (emplaced, compliance & contentment) with the corner of creating together (convergence, reconnect). The second axe represents transformative disruptions, which needs space for new, diverse and critical perspectives as well as space for taking distance and disconnect from time to time.

Results

Before the research: significant experiences that led me to the topic of transformative learning

To embed this research into my own life-story, I will shortly share some significant experiences that, looking back, have steered me in the direction of this research and significantly influenced both theoretical development as well as the empirical research process. The insights below are based upon my written-out memories (m_0).

Around three years before embarking on this research I underwent, what I would now identify as, a transformative period in my life. Triggered by physical ailments, I was confronted with some mental health challenges. What followed was a journey of exploring my body, my psyche, my emotional and spiritual health and learning about the intrinsic connection between them. I dived into yoga, meditation, psychotherapy, body work

and alternative, eastern and western healing modalities. Most of these types of learning experiences relate to the dimension of immersion and compassionate connection. It was about becoming more 'emplaced' and grounded in my body and disconnecting to create a space for cultivating self-compassion, reflection, retreat and rest. This resulted in a number of learning experiences that directly relate to some of the themes covered in this research.

First of all, I experienced the connection between my body and my mind/soul/spirit as I was confronted with areas in my body that kept a lot of tension. Learning to release these tensions through for example yoga involved not just physical sensations but also sensations of panic, anxiety through for example hyperventilation. A part of this journey involved exploring the connection to my feminine body, my sensuality and ability to 'draw knowledge from my body', instead of just my head and its cognitive abilities. A result of this body centred work as well as meditation was a different relationship to my senses, and more intimate connection to my senses. This changed some basic experiences like physical contact with others and the way I perceived my environment when e.g. walking in nature. Experiencing this critical awareness of the connection between mind and body and the need for nurturing a symbiotic relationship made me wonder whether this could be a prerequisite for creating a deeper sense of connection and symbioses with others and the wider world. This personal experience thus sensitized me in my research to notions of inner and outer sustainability.

Secondly, as a person who spent a lot of her time involved in rational, conceptual thinking, I moved towards a more embodied way of existing. This involved letting my work be guided by intuitive and creative insights more than a pre-designed, rationally thought through work 'plan'. As a result, the research process was more creative, more 'uncontrolled', and more in line with the Theory U element of 'what wants to emerge' (Scharmer 2009). This relates to the quality of being emplaced and in tune with my surroundings as well as opened up to a wider space of possibility where I became more sensitive to creative diverse insights, ideas and impressions.

As a result of the inner processes I went through in the space of disconnection, I reconnected with others in a different way. I felt myself become less rigid in certain principles, softer, more vulnerable, more empathic and compassionate for the suffering of others. From someone who always had her things perfectly in order and sometimes lacked a sense of empathy or compassion for those who did not, to someone who realised perfectionism and hard work do not prevent you from experiencing the challenges of being human and may even stand in the way of intimate connection to others.

The last realisation, that served as an important clue to this research, was the connection between the themes I was concerned with in my studies and work/life and the 'personal'

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development process I was going through on the other side. Here I realized the connection between being critical of current unsustainable systems and structures and the need to look at myself and my intimate environment if I want to change these systems. This realization mainly came through reading the work on self-compassion by Neff & Pommier (2013) who explains how the ability to cultivate compassion to ourselves (which requires a mindful connection to our bodies, feelings and emotions), enables our ability to feel compassion towards others and is linked to altruism, pro-environmental behaviour and successful leadership. As I have mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, it made me wonder if I had stumbled upon the piece of the puzzle that was missing in my attempts to understand certain problematics in our modern-day world.

With these experiences in my metaphorical backpack, I started to look into the link between self-compassion and sustainable change and entered the academic world of the 'inner dimension of sustainability' as well as the world of ecovillages.

During the research

To better understand the relationship between processes typically labelled as 'inner' or 'personal' and manifestations of 'outer', structural changes in behaviour and lifestyles, I started my research on place-based transformative learning in ecovillages. I approached this research as an 'embodied' researcher, a term found by my colleagues and me (Horlings et al. 2020) for the ways place-based researchers engage with the people and places participating in their research. An embodied researcher is not an objective outsider that merely subtracts 'data' to cognitively analyse, but instead engages with the research as a human being, with their head, hands, heart and feet. Following a relational notion of place, the researcher, for a short period of time, is an active part of the ongoing production and reproduction of places while at the same time engaging with these places also changes the researcher. Self-transformation through the engagement in places and a complementary process of critical self-reflection, is part of 'embodied' research. In this section I will take a closer look at this process by zooming into significant experiences I had during my time spent in the ecovillages. In the discussion I will explain why I believe the experiences described above from before I started the research as well as the experiences described below from during the research, have influenced me as a person as well as influenced the research and my capacities as researcher. The accounts below are based upon my fieldnotes and written out memories.

Re-connecting in compassion, divergence & critique

The most important theme that emerged from looking at my own notes and memories is learning to cultivate a different kind of connection to other people. Many fieldnotes and memories describe observations of how people relate to each other in ways that so far were not so common in my lifeworld (term from Tim Ingold). I recall several examples: sitting

in a circle, using a talking stick, practice true listening without responding, methods like Forum (see next paragraph), open and honest communication where people openly express their feelings and needs.

An intense experience of compassionate relatedness was during GEN conference in Spain (4-8 July 2016) where I attended a 3-day workshop on 'Forum' facilitated by two members of the ZEGG community and education centre in Germany. Forum is a method developed by the now two communities of Tamera and ZEGG. Forum works with a circle, in which one person stands in the middle expressing an experience, thoughts, grievance, feelings either through talking or acting. When this person is finished, people from the circle 'mirror' what they have seen. Usually, one session covers a particular topic. In this particular session we came to work with the topic of racial injustices. In this session a black young woman shared about her experiences as a black woman; her pain in relation to the trauma of the past and her insistence on the need to heal this trauma (m_1). As I write in my memories I had a very intense experience of compassionate connection, but also getting in touch to a strong sense of critique I harboured inside myself. The whole time she was speaking tears streamed down my face that could not be stopped. *'She articulated something that somehow I also had felt …. in how there is so much unspoken in relationships between white and people of colour. And the widespread ignorance of this, as if all the racial and colonial history is in the past and behind us while in fact it really is not.'* (m_1). At that point I realized that in fact what was happening at that moment might be exactly the missing part that is needed to work through all these twisted ties and relationships between the global north and the global south, between white and black people, between modern and indigenous cultures: *'I just sat in this circle listened and watched her and cried in silence and somehow it made total sense to me and felt very liberating.'* While she talked, I realized how much confusion and frustration I had still living inside of myself around this topic and for the first time shared my own experiences. I felt relieved that expressing these feelings was received very positively by the aforementioned black woman, *'even though I'm not the direct one to suffer in this situation, it is important that I voice my concerns and the pain I feel as well. This is appreciated and needed.'*(m_0). Because of this experience I realized how few spaces there usually are in our 'normal' lives in which we intentionally approach and welcome that which is painful and uncomfortable, guided by skilled facilitators who are able to hold the space in such a way that the experience becomes meaningful without escalating into dis-functional conflict, anger or confusion.

Those first-hand experiences of how it feels to connect with others in different ways and the value of learning different ways of communicating with each other have contributed, I feel, to a sense of clarity on the value and need for research to explore the role of these practices in processes of transition. Furthermore, perceiving an experience like the one

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described above, in an embodied way, as part of instead of as a spectator/observer, gives me as researcher a better understanding of the depth and value of such gatherings. A 'spectator/outside observer' point of view might not have conveyed the full meaning of these gatherings. Lastly, experiencing the impact of connecting to others in a different way on my own sense of belonging, wellbeing and connection gives me more clarity with regards to the question if and why these practices are of value in light of sustainable societal transformation.

Disconnect to reconnect & self-compassion

Several situations during this research made me realize the importance of clear communication with regards to our needs instead of exhibiting 'socially accepted' behaviour all the time. This also seemed to relate to being more attuned to our bodies by becoming more sensitive to and accepting of its needs and limits. It is about our capacity to be honest and vulnerable amongst others in order to take care of ourselves, prevent burn-outs and 'humanize' (professional) environments. It can also be understood as a way to challenge or counter a predominantly masculine culture by bringing in more feminine values.

I personally also experienced that being clear about my needs helps me to feel safe and comfortable in a group of people. I have for example asked for a room alone in places where I was initially set up to sleep in a dorm room. Even though initially this often feels uncomfortable to do, I received mostly positive responses from others assuring me that it is good to know what you need and ask for it. A fellow Tamera course participant, with whom I connected over our shared sensitive nature, told me how she appreciated my decision to skip some of the sessions as it showed her that that is in fact possible and she felt it was good for the group that people take responsibility for their own needs. This could be termed as 'embodied immersion', being in spaces that invite us to become more sensitive and attuned to our bodies, and communicating the signals we receive from our bodies. I witnessed this multiple times in the way course facilitators communicated with the course participants. While sometimes it might also be beneficial to lean into discomfort and stretch your own boundaries a bit, I felt that when I was clear about my needs and people appreciated and respected this, I could handle much more of what I would usually experience as discomfort or a sense of 'intrusion' by others. This showed me that showing up for myself, which also involves in my case finding spaces to retreat and disconnect combined with people who respect this makes it possible for me to feel safe in groups of people and genuinely connect with them.

Stability, contentment and self-compassion in change

Although there is a general sense of urgency in networks like the ecovillage network concerning the urgent need for change in light of climate change, I also learned that in

order to endure change, we sometimes have to take it slower than we perhaps ideally request from ourselves in order to address our own needs. What comes forward from my notes and memories, and what I also strongly recall, is the sense of peace, relief and joy upon returning home after my various trips to the communities, having enjoyed the experience of staying in a community for a bit but also feeling a sense of relief when returning home again, to the quiet and familiar of my own space. In my memories I write, after one of the first weekend visits to a small Finnish community, 'it is still hard for me to believe that I would be able to live in such a community' (m_1)..While I was pondering this, I recall another experience during a workshop where a man shared his exhaustion from travelling around with his young family to learn about and experience communities and seek one to potentially settle in. Even though he had been a very positive, engaging person and clearly interested, inspired and energized by the conference, he was tired and it showed, he confessed this with tears in his eyes. As a group we were asked to witness his tiredness and our facilitators spoke about the occasional need to take a break from a process of change, to rest for a while in an 'in between' place, before continuing the journey. That being said, through the life-story interviews I carried out it also became apparent that most community members have had moments in which they were unsure whether to stay or go. The 'pack your bags syndrome', one community member called it. Another one confessed that her first seven years in the community were hard. I suppose, as always it is about finding a balance between staying when things get uncomfortable, as they inevitably will in a process of change, and finding a way to anchor in a place of stability and rest. This is reflected in the qualities of distanced and disconnected (to later again re-connect).

Immersion, convergence belonging and a sense of meaning through embeddedness in a community

Throughout this research, the sense of connection I experienced by being part of a research network as well as feeling connected to the communities participating in this research, have been important in fuelling my motivation throughout the process. In contrast to my mostly very positive experience, there were a few places I visited during preliminary field visits (see chapter 3) where I did not feel at ease. The reasons for this included me not feeling very cared for, the place I stayed did not appear very clean or cared for either or because of unwelcome/aggressive noise, either from a drunk man (who did not have any bad intentions, but nonetheless made an intimidating appearance when appearing drunk in the middle of the night), or a couple fighting aggressively during the night in the kitchen under my bedroom up to the point where other community members had to step in. In such situations I felt rather unsafe and uncomfortable. A feeling that was mutual in one case, where some community members expressed their reluctance in working together with someone working for a government institution (as government institutions had been in the past involved in land acquisition). This obviously, influenced

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my choice for case studies. In the communities that I did feel at home, I specifically appreciated the daily check in moments during my visits in the communities: a morning circle to start of the day together creates a sense of belonging, stability and meaning, a sense of contributing to something that is bigger than myself. Other experiences that evoked a sense of meaning, belonging and community were collective gatherings at the GEN conference 2016. For example, the start of a collective gathering guided by a sjaman from south America, inviting the energies from the four directions to join and support us, left me feeling very calm and still within myself (m_1). Another strong experience occurred during a collective gathering that honoured the initiators or 'elderly' of the whole movement. As the more than 400 attendants of the conference gathered in circles within circles, while everyone placed one hand on the shoulder of the person in the circle in front of them, singing a song together, I felt a strong sense of belonging and somehow tears started streaming down my face. *'Interestingly'*, I write in my memories, *'I did not, and still do not, live in a community, but still I felt profoundly a part of that energy and movement as well. I felt that somehow, with my work, I was also contributing my share to it, in my own way'* (m_1). This sense of immersion, I realize now, has given me an important sense of meaning and clarity throughout the research process and is something I have missed during the years of writing. Furthermore, I have come to believe that these kinds of embodied experiences trigger and invite a researcher's analytical curiosity. From my perspective, experiences like these triggered the impulse to better understand why they felt meaningful. In this way, embodied, 'emotional experiences during fieldwork can trigger theoretical reflection. Herein lies, I believe, the value of auto-ethnographic research by considering the personal experiences of the researcher as valuable research material and guidance points in the process. Lastly, I have learned to integrate this sense of belonging and connection in my own methods as well as in other areas of my work: for example by facilitating change processes or keeping the connection to my research by creating a values/moodboard to connect me to my inner motivations for doing this work.

Compassionate connection as sign of transgression

By bringing this sense of 'compassionate connection' into the research process, the 'how' of doing research matters, not just the outcome. Doing research differently is a transgressive act in itself and essentially aims to contribute to institutional reform. It's about stretching the boundaries of what is considered professional behaviour, professional relationships, academic research, 'good' research and moving away from the traditional notion of objective, western science. I for example experienced the photovoice group sessions as well as my interviews and informal conversations during fieldwork as deeply meaningful. The vulnerability and openness of participants really moved me, people telling me their stories that also involved difficult things including depression, suicide, their grievances and sadness due to conflicts as well as situations, people or things that made them emotional as they were so important in their lives, shedding tears,

having genuine meaningful connections to other people. These moments of sharing and connecting do feel important in the bigger picture of a change process; it is where we find comfort, support, belonging and a sense of stability from which we can draw energy to continue our work in support of a more sustainable world.

I have also learned through this research, that in light of 'sustainability' and contributing to societal change, the qualities of our personal relationships matter. This, I learned specifically from the Tamera, involves looking at structures based on underlying sentiments of scarcity, disconnection, loneliness, individualism, security, control, domination and accumulation in our communities and societies but also in our personal (romantic) relationships.

Discussion & Conclusion

It may sometimes feel as if the transition to more sustainable societies lies in practical, technology centred solutions addressing issues of e.g. fossil fuels. However, as many authors by now have stated (Hedlund-de Witt 2013; Horlings 2015; Ives et al. 2020; Kunze and Woiwode 2018; Scharmer and Kaufer 2012), and which I confirm with this research, the change to a more sustainable world involves much more. It requires us to re-think and re-learn certain practices on a very daily level, addressing questions like: how do I relate to my (animate) body and the bodies of other beings around me? How do I communicate and connect with others? What kind of society based on what kind of values do I support/perpetuate through my daily life and work? How do I cope with changes? What does that do to me? Do I have the capacity to deal with feelings that arise as a result of changes in a healthy way? Do I practice what I preach/is my awareness of social and ecological issues in accordance with my lifestyle and behaviour? Am I able to open myself up to new perspectives, different opinions?

Gaining awareness of underlying assumptions and stories that inform behaviour, if not, changing this behaviour is very difficult and should not rely on either economic or legal incentives, which, as shown by Maiteny (2000) is not the most sustainable option either. In order to overcome deeply ingrained patterns of competition, separation, scarcity and domination we all need to reflect on our individual and collective patterns and practices. In this last section I will reflect upon five ways that show the value of autoethnographic inquiry in sustainability research. Via these five routes, auto-ethnographic inquiry has the potential to strengthen oneself as a person and as a researcher by becoming more attuned (to particular signs, to other people, intuitive insights), aligned (to personal and research specific values), sensitive (tuned in to all the senses, not just cognitive) and potentially even transgressive.

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Autoetnographic can open up spaces of possibility & invites accountability

First of all, autoethnographic inquiry can result in shifts in perspectives and a greater awareness of certain aspects of your own life and 'self' that might have been invisible to you before. In doing so it can open up spaces of possibility through the realization that things can also be perceived and organized differently, which may result in making different choices in life *and* in a research process. These choices may result in a process of transgression if they challenge the status quo of a particular system, organization, institution or group/community. Autoethnographic inquiry invites, according to me, a deeper level of accountability among researchers and research institutions. It can be understood as holding up a mirror which helps you to investigate not just the 'other' but also yourself and the institutions you are part of. This is not always a straightforward or easy thing to do. As I wrote in the results, I feel a little confused at times, moving 'in between', looking for a place to put these learnings into practice while (still) operating as well in the 'normal' society, albeit trying to do this in a way that is aligned with my values, not shying away from confronting structures that I feel do not serve me and our broader society anymore. Vieten et al. (2006) recognize the challenge of integrating a significant experience into daily life. As already mentioned in the first paper of this thesis, for an experience to become transformative, an enhancing environment is required to enact the experience in daily life. Vieten et al. (2006) have identified several factors that help with this integration, 1) becoming or being part of a like-minded social network or community; 2) finding a language and context for the experience; 3) continuing to access new information and teachings; 4) a daily mind-body practice to tolerate cognitive and behavioural changes; 5) engaging in ways of creatively expressing or manifesting the experience through action; and 6) daily reminders, e.g. symbols either in one's environment or worn on one's body. This autoethnographic chapter is one way to creatively express my experiences and at the same time serves as a (daily) reminder while I'm working on this chapter. Furthermore, as mentioned, I do regularly challenge particular structures and habits in the research community, through my work as co-founder of the platform 'Re.imagenary' as well in my work as a researcher for a regional research institute. In particular I find myself challenging the notion of distant, objective researcher and instead inviting fellow researchers to pay more attention to the underlying values informing research and take more responsibility over the use of research findings as well as the process of acquiring and interpreting research data. Furthermore I advocate for the recognition of several forms of information and knowledge, including experiential, embodied, sensuous and intuitive knowledge.

Empathy for research participants and participating communities

Secondly, autoethnographic inquiry can result in more empathy for research participants and the place you collaborate with as a researcher. By reflecting on your own process,

learning and imperfections you might be able to better understand the imperfect nature of whatever place, community or initiative you engage with as a researcher. This resonates with Gibson- Graham's (2008) reflection on the ineffectiveness of taking a too critical attitude as social scientists often resulting in discarding initiatives that might have transformative potential but are not perfect nor very influential/powerful (yet). In this research I for example realized by spending time with members from several ecovillages or people searching for one, how much energy, time and commitment it takes to create a new kind of social structure without the support of existing institutional, legal, economic and social structures. This links to cultivating compassion for ourselves as well as others when going through a process of change. The example in the results of the man showing his exhaustion from looking for a community for his family showed me how important it is to challenge ourselves to expand our boundaries but also stay in touch with our needs, our bodies' needs, the needs of our closest relationships, our children, and if needed to take it slow. Even in the face of urgency. This I believe is a contradiction we have to embrace, we cannot go faster than our bodies, our nervous system and our hearts can take. There are ways in which we can support ourselves so that we can handle change better, through spiritual and contemplative practices, managing our thoughts, understanding and working with our feelings and emotions, having social support and cultivating a strong and healthy body, but even then, there will be a limit. Of course, sometimes circumstances force us to change radically in a very short time, in which case it is probably needed to turn towards ourselves to process all of it, rest, grieve if needed. This however, is also something that touches upon the topic of privilege and social injustice: having the ability to take time to rest and recharge after or during intense periods in life is a privilege and not possible for everyone everywhere (due to an unsafe environment, economic stress and inequalities, caretaking needs, etc).

Cultivating new skills and self-knowledge through self-inquiry as a reflection of integrity

Fourth, depending on the central themes of a research, the researcher will gain skills, self-knowledge and unravel parts of themselves that they had not tuned into before. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter states '*"It's not possible to engage with a system without also addressing the self."* When it comes to research on the broad overarching theme of 'sustainability' I do believe that all of us, including and perhaps especially us researchers, have work to do unravelling our own internalized believes, value systems, worldviews and habits. Especially when assuming that change comes from the inside out.

Compassion, vulnerability and creating intimate relations with others

For me this has manifested first of all in learning about going beyond the 'I' in the practice of compassion. Self-care, self-knowledge and self-compassion have been key elements of many of my learning experiences, starting with the mental and physical

healing journey before the research. Although often labelled as 'personal' development, turning towards our individual bodies and inner worlds need not to have a character of self-obsession, neo-liberal narcissism or constant self-improvement, but can also be understood to serve another ultimate goal: deepening our ability to connect, to have intimate relationships with beings around us, be it human or nonhuman, to experience and be conscious of how intimately and sensually we are connected to our surroundings. In fact, Verheage (2018) argues that an intimate connection to ourselves, which includes self-knowledge and self-care is an imperative for any intimate relationship with someone else. Furthermore, Kristin Neff and others (Neff and Pommier 2013; Welp and Brown 2014) have showed, cultivating self-compassion ultimately leads to increased other focused concern and altruism, the ability to look at others compassionately. As described in the results, spending time in ecovillages supported this learning process of connecting to other people in a different way, characterized by vulnerability, compassion and authenticity. This changes our relationships to others, as vulnerability is an imperative for intimacy and meaningful relationships. It also reminds me of the work of Brené Brown (2017) who argues that our culture is in crisis as we more and more retreat to our own ideological bunkers to 'hate from afar, dehumanizing others rather than risk having real, meaningful conversations across their differences' . With her research, she tries to find answers to the question of how we can find our way back to each other to overcome our sense of disconnection and find our common humanity. One of the things she found is the importance of what Durkheim (1912) referred to as 'collective effervescence' or 'collective assembly' , moments in which we share joy or pain with others, even strangers. It is moments like these that remind us of the inextricable connection to our fellow human beings, even if those human beings share a different opinion on certain political matters. An important pre-requisite for such an experience of compassionate connection as I would term it, is vulnerability (Brown 2012). Small children, who have not yet 'braced' themselves, find this usually very easy, however, as we slowly move into adulthood, experiencing joy and pain together with others is a very vulnerable experience (Brown 2019). It requires courage to lean into the emotional exposure, uncertainty and risk that comes with showing our joy or pain unapologetically as we can never be sure how others will respond to us (ibid). As Brown (2019) states, in order to have moments of collective joy and pain, *'We have to show up and put ourselves out there. When the singing starts and the dancing is under way, at the very least we need to tap our toes and hum along. When the tears fall and the hard story is shared, we have to show up and stay with the pain.'* 'The more we're willing to seek out moments of collective joy and show up for experiences of collective pain—for real, in person, not online—, she argues, 'the more difficult it becomes to deny our human connection, even with people we may disagree with' (ibid).

The relation to our body and a society based on competition and scarcity

Secondly I learned how to get more attuned to my own body and more sensitive to my surroundings. Although linking sustainability with the way we approach our bodies seems a bit farfetched, I share a similar experience as Felix Rauschmayer (2017) (albeit very different in magnitude). He shares how the notion of 'fighting the cancer' made him feel uncomfortable, as it felt like he was supposed to fight his own body. If we understand our body as 'matter', our physical shape that enables us to perceive and connect with our surroundings, the tendency to fight, control or dominate our own bodies can be extrapolated to our tendency to fight, control and dominate 'nature' with our human cognitive abilities. Once I became conscious about this through my own experiences with a physical ailment, it seems that messages to fight our bodies are all around us: in the diet culture, in fitness classes that are called 'body attack', and sometimes in unnecessary aggressive treatments or surgery[1]. In this light Paul Verhaege (2018), professor psychoanalysis and clinical consulting at the University of Gent, shows in his book 'Intimacy' the relationship between modern day 'illnesses' and a culture of consumerism and competition. He argues how key beliefs of scarcity in modern day culture including 'as a person I can always do better', 'as a body I can always be more perfect' (Verhaege 2018: 132) result in a disconnect from our ourselves, our bodies and our inner being. As a result, our society is based on constant striving and competition and a sense of having to 'earn' ones right to exist instead of naturally having a place in the broader scheme of things. This constant striving to a assure a life that is successful leads to estrangement from our bodies, according to Verhaege. (2018) Furthermore, this image of perfection is soaked with a promise and impediment of constant individual pleasure that can be achieved through consuming and is fed by a constant stream of media and commercial images grounded in a society that profits from our sense of scarcity (ibid).

Confirmation and insight through intuitive and emotional knowledge & clarity on how personal values guide your research

Lastly, reflecting upon my own 'transformative experiences' through autoethnographic inquiry has contributed to a sense of clarity on the value and need for research like this, a sense of importance to share the stories of these ecovillages. Perceiving for example a community gathering in such an embodied and emotional way as I did during the GEN Europe conference, gives me as researcher a better understanding of the depth and value of gatherings like these. If I would not have 'felt' anything myself, I might have had difficulties to identify the value of such a gathering, I would have remained a 'spectator' instead of a part of the experience. In general I feel that I was able to access a deeper understanding of the themes I researched by having lived through similar experiences myself. Integrating autoethnographic inquiry in the research process thus allows a

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1   With which I absolutely do not want to oppose Western medical practice in general

researcher to harness their intuition, create meaningful and intimate encounters with research participants and approach research as a creative process grounded in personal values and attuned to the 'place' of research. At the same time, autoethnographic inquiry, through critical self & theoretical reflection, invites researchers to be aware of how these personal, intuitive, creative, empathic and sensuous insights have guided the research process. In this way we can be explicit about different sources of knowledge and insight that informed our research rather than letting these unconsciously 'bias' the research. It can provide clarity and a more explicit account on how personal processes and values have guided the research process. An example of this is the study by Tilley-Lubbs (2009) reflecting upon her own good intentions as educator and researcher in a service learning project linking university students to members of the Mexican and Honduran immigrant community in Virginia in the US. By becoming aware of her own biases with regard towards the immigrant community, this educator realized how she unintentionally created social hierarchies in this project by labelling the university students as the 'haves' and the member of the immigrant community as the 'have-not' who needed support.

To bring this chapter to a conclusion, I feel that what I have learned prior to and as a result of conducting this research on transformative learning with ecovillages is what Otto Scharmer (2009) talks about when he discusses the changes in social fields that he sees emerging 'from the rubble': *It's a different quality of connection, a different way of being present with each other and with what wants to emerge*'. Scharmer argues that when this happens, the *'quality of thinking, conversing and collective action'* changes and as a result *'people can connect with a deeper source of creativity and knowing and move beyond the patterns of the past'*. When this happens, we can step in the power of our authentic selves, tune in to our *'highest future possibility – and being to operate from that place'*. This is needed to break with old institutionalized collective behaviour that does not serve the needs of today's world anymore but instead maintains and exacerbates climate change and social and economic inequalities and injustices. Through this auto-ethnographical account I discussed how I learned about these different qualities of connection, presence and creativity through a dynamic interplay between self-transformation and my research with ecovillages. The things I have learned made me realize what is possible, why it is desirable to change our relationship with ourselves, each other, our surroundings and our future. They also clarified my own role in the bigger process of societal change and motivated me to integrate such changes in the social fields of (academic) research, education, sustainability initiatives and facilitation of groups as well as my own personal relationships. As my story shows this is an imperfect, ongoing process but one with a sincere intention to support the birthing process of a future world that is waiting to emerge.

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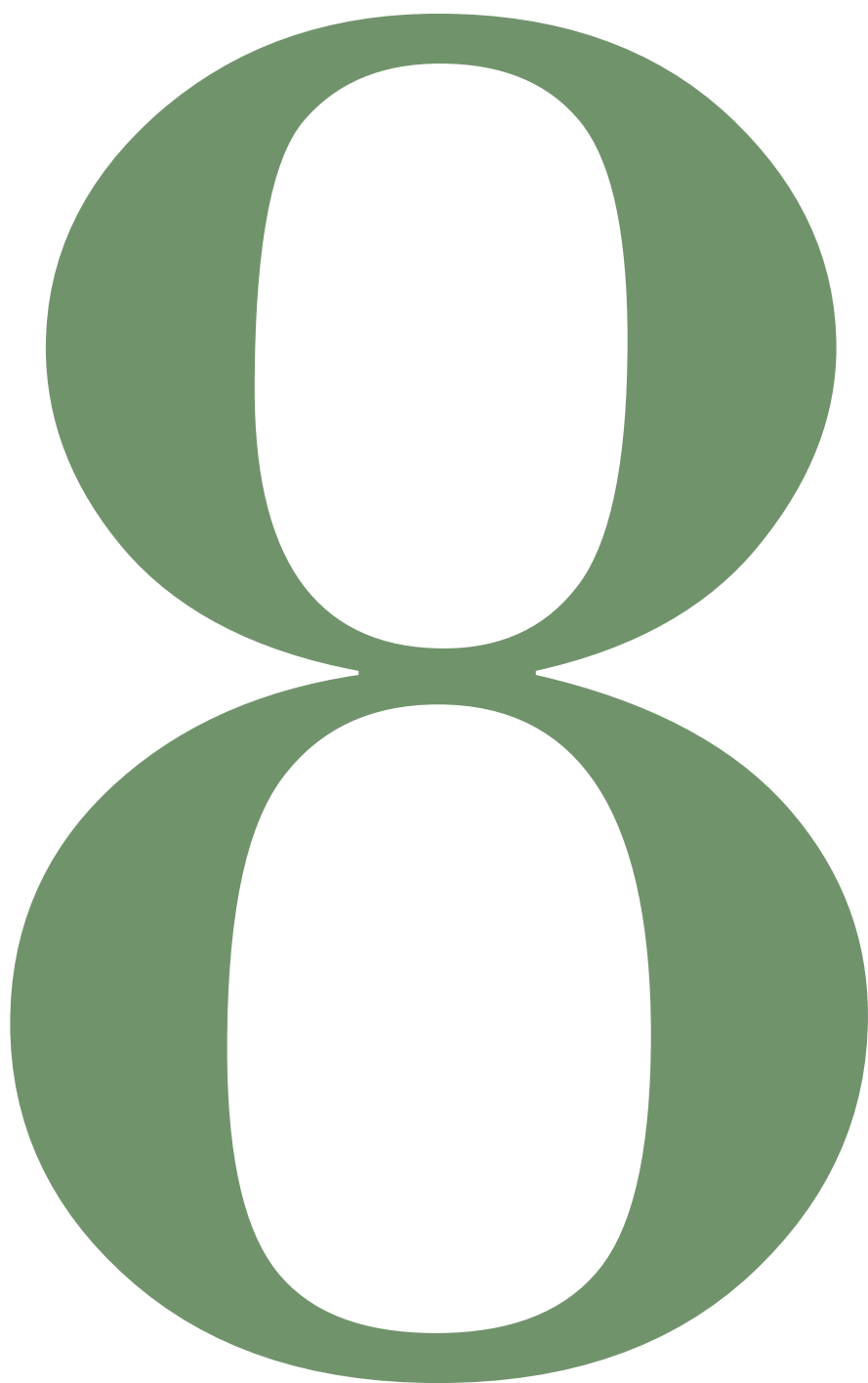
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Discussion & Conclusion

This research set out to better understand how sustainability initiatives engage with the 'inner dimension' and if and how this relates to changes in the 'outer dimension'. The findings of this research are based upon critical literature review and empirical research with members from three different ecovillages: Väinölä and Kurjen Tila in Finland and Tamera in Portugal.

Main findings

'Individual' learning journeys towards life in an ecovillage

The research found that the learning journey of most community members started with a wish, or motivation to change the status quo of persisting hegemonic structures that negatively influence ecological and social justice (chapter 5). Many participants identified one or more 'realizations' or 'triggers' as a result of particular experiences that awakened this critical attitude. These experiences included first of all the witnessing of suffering, either directly or indirectly through books or visual media. This could be suffering of the environment or social injustice, both current and historical (poverty, hunger, genocide, war). Secondly, some participants were triggered as a result of being confronted with the inhibitions of ones given identity, based on gender or ethnicity. Third, many participants mentioned meeting role models in the form of either visionary persons or social initiatives that sparked new insights and perspectives. Last, many participants mentioned experiencing a sense of being 'out of place' in ''normal'' societal spheres at a certain point in their lives, either in more personal or work-related environments, or both. All of these experiences evoked feelings of frustration and triggered a process of learning in which participants started questioning dominant morals, cultural values and beliefs.

This initial sense of critique, made participants aware of a state of disconnection on various levels which hence evoked a search for connection and community. The resulting experiences or 'glimpses' of community ignited a longing for community in many participants, followed by joining, or searching for, a community project. Part of this process included getting acquainted with alternative ideas and paradigms, in which participants reflected upon their own identity, background, history, culture and position in the world and connected with the consequences of modernity and one's own lifestyle and actions. Complementary capacities and skills were developed to successfully engage in community projects and act upon their sense of critique. This included developing the ability to turn towards their inner worlds through spiritual/contemplative and/or embodied practices, developing a different relationship to the nonhuman world and re-connecting to other humans or 'otherness' including different cultures, worldviews and perspectives. In practice this involved learning how to effectively communicate, unlearn competitiveness and jealousy, dealing with difficult emotions that come up in interaction with others, learning new ways of decision making and navigating through conflict. Learning these skills requires individual inner work in dynamic relation with social work, which will be discussed more in the next section.

Developing these new capacities involved learning to act and react from a place of compassion instead of anger, frustration and sacrifice. For some participants this involved realizing that the behaviour participants dismissed or judged in others, were also in some

way present in themselves. This realization helped to overcome judgement and anger, which negatively influences wellbeing. Self-compassion was found to be beneficial in dealing with the more challenging aspects of the journey towards sustainable community and prevent overburden or burn-out along the way. Community life for many participants turned out to be a way in itself to take care of themselves for it allows a life in alignment with one's values as well as a better work/life balance. However, community can also be an extra burden to someone's wellbeing in times of conflict for example. Working through such challenging times involved self-compassion as well as affective and meta-cognitive learning processes to learn how to authentically respond.

The opportunity to learn and experiment with creatively integrating ecological habits into daily life, was for most participant the biggest benefit of being part of a community project. Creativity was also reflected at the individual level in participants making non confirmative life-style choices. Secondly, art-based creative practice was valued as a way of self-expression, making sense of inner learnings, and experiencing a sense of connection either to the more-than-human world or to other humans. In this way, creative work was sometimes experienced as spiritual.

Learning as and in community

Apart from experiences and learning processes that are more centralized around the individual (albeit always in dynamic and interactional relationship with other humans, nonhumans and the material environment), the second part of the research (chapter 6) focused more on significant experiences as part of (transformative) learning processes at the community level.

The integration of the nonhuman in the meaning of 'community' was an important topic, most notable in two of the three ecovillages participating in the research. This involved understanding the nonhuman as a part of community life having a central role in daily life, either as a source of wellbeing and health, a caretaker by providing food and water and also as a source of spiritual or contemplative experience. Specifically in the community of Tamera, nature was understood as animated and spiritual, as a co-operative partner with whom can be communicated and collaborated. Related to cultivating and renewing this connection to the nonhuman world is the search for a lost sense of community. Participants find this by becoming part of a (human) community that is also intimately connected to natural cyclical rhythms and processes, for example through cultivating their own food. A sense of community and belonging was furthermore enhanced by the way communities imbued the place they had settled in (as in geographical location of the community) with meaning. Either by the idea that the place was predestined for their community or by gradually contributing particular qualities to particular parts of the communal grounds and spaces. In this way particular places were found to evoke or

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support particular moods and atmospheres, either to retreat inward, connect with others, for supporting creative work or spiritual purposes.

The relation with place was furthermore enhanced by interacting with their direct environment through physical, creative practices including building, farming, water management. Typically, the communities experienced this interaction as a two-way dialogical process, in which they co-operated with nonhuman or material entities involved, ascribing inherent value and animism to properties like water. The enactment of these practices in many cases was an expression of critique in itself: by creating alternative techniques, social structures and practices, the communities countered dominant hegemonic structures that they considered to be unsustainable.

Another important learning theme concerned navigating dissonance and conflict. The research reflected the vital importance of attaining knowledge and skills to effectively move through difficult situations that arise when divergent perspectives clash. This ideally involves individual community members reflecting upon their own inner structures and doing the necessary inner work that helps them relate to others in a more effective and nonviolent way, as well as a community learning process. Seeking support of, and learning from, wider community networks and organizations can be necessary and helpful in this process just as cultivating compassion for oneself and others.

Lastly, the research showed that striking the balance between an inward and outward focus as community is also experienced as a continuous learning process. As creating and successfully maintaining a thriving intentional community requires a lot of internal focus, integrating into, and connecting with, the wider local and regional environment requires conscious attention. Although the communities could in some way be considered somewhat alternative and 'eccentric' islands in a sea of 'conventionality', they make conscious efforts to be connected to places near and far. For example, through welcoming long- and short-term visitors and volunteers, co-operating with local food producers, regional activism, art exhibitions, collaborate with ecovillage networks, and a variety of likeminded organizations, knowledge institutes and the local government.

Auto-ethnographic reflection

In chapter 7 I discuss how my personal life story is interwoven with the story of this research. Some significant experiences prior to this research pointed me towards the main topics of this research. My personal interests in re-establishing the relationship to my body and my inner, intuitive nature through body work and contemplative practices including meditation and practising (self) compassion translated into an academic interest in these topics. My interest was specifically triggered by the idea that cultivating self-compassion also leads to altruistic feelings and deeds including pro-environmental behaviour. Through

self-reflection combined with critical theoretical reflection in order to place my personal experiences in a broader political, social and cultural context, I discuss the different ways in which this research is influenced by my personal experiences, interests and insights.

My personal experiences with illness, body work, yoga, meditation and self-compassion as well my interests in international development and food security, influenced how I initiated the research. Intuitive insights as well as meaningful experiences during fieldwork, influenced theoretical and methodological choices made. Time spent in the communities and interaction with academic literature and fellow researchers resulted in a deepening of my personal learning journey as well the development of new (self) knowledge and capacities.

I learned how to connect to myself and others in a different way, based on a more authentic sense of self and therefor a deeper sense of connection to the other. I also learned to take into account the balance between change and stability, by reflecting upon my own and community members' reactions to change.

First hand experiences of fragments from community life and culture helped me as a researchers to understand not just mentally, but experientially, the significance of for example community gathering. This helped, I believe, to make good value judgements throughout the research, while being explicit about these value judgement ensures transparency concerning the researchers' subjectivity.

The experience of being connected to the participating community, and being temporarily embraced in their community, as well as the connection to the overarching vision of the ecovillage movement, strengthened my motivation and dedication to this research project.

Lastly, the skills I learned through body work, contemplative practices and cultivating self-compassion influence the way I designed the methodology and the way I interacted with community members throughout this research. Both the life-story interviews as well as photovoice session created spaces for compassionate listening, sharing and connecting, which I consider to be a valuable output of the research by itself. Furthermore, through my own personal learning experiences I was often better able to relate to the stories of community members.

In conclusion, I argue that autoethnographic inquiry made me, as a person and as a researcher, more attuned and sensitive to others, the environment and my own intuition. Furthermore, autoethnography invites integrity and accountability in researchers. I learned that in order to address the systems that I wish to see changed, I need to address myself, and the way I organize my life and relationships as well.

Place-based transformative learning as four-dimensional process

The findings of this research have been theoretically conceptualized as 'place-based transformative learning' (PBTL). This PBTL perspective has been continuously developed throughout this thesis, started with a critical literature review (chapter 4) after which empirical insights were used to test, modify and further develop the framework into a four-dimensional framework capturing the essence of PBTL (chapter 5 & 6).

Based on the initial literature study (chapter 4), three dimensions were identified as the building blocks of a place-based perspective to transformative learning: connection, (self) compassion and creativity. The empirical data showed the need to add a fourth dimension (chapter 5): critique, which later on was framed as 'transgression' (chapter 5 & 6). By the end of the research the theoretical framework of place-based transformative learning (PBTL) had thus developed into a four-dimensional framework. The four dimensions being: **connection**, **compassion**, **creativity** and **transgression**. Each dimensions holds two oppositional qualities. Every quality also 'corners' with a complementary quality from another dimension: being distanced, for example, corners with being disconnected in order to be reconnected, while the quality of being critical corners with the quality of being divergent and so on. The framework shows how transformative learning (TL) and transgressive learning are not separate, distinctive processes but intimately related, which also holds for learning that is qualified as either 'inner' or 'outer'. Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the four-dimensional PBTL framework.
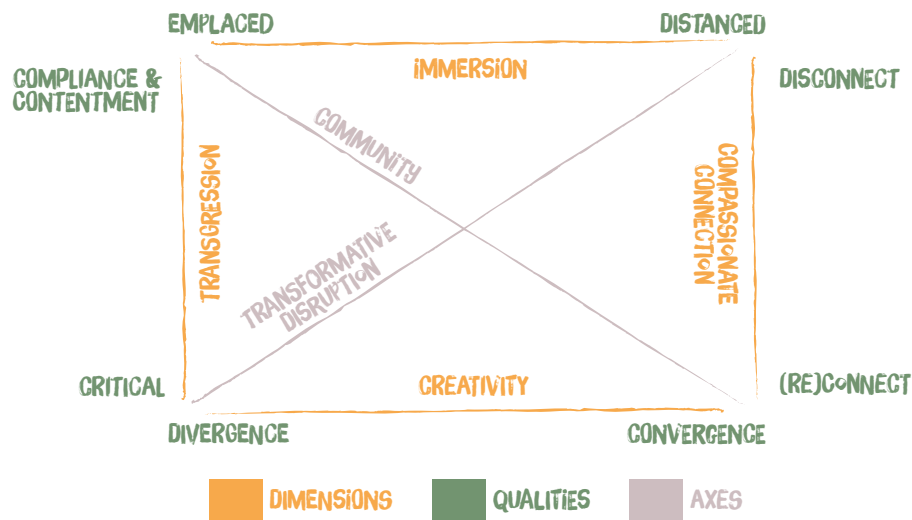

Figure 16. A four-dimensional impression of PBTL (Figure 6 in chapter 6)

Connection to place is about being **emplaced** in the day-to-day life of a community in a specific geographical location (physically, ecologically, socially, culturally, spiritually and politically) while relationally connected to more **distanced** people and places in an increasingly globalized world (chapter 4). Being **emplaced** in a community requires a certain level of being **compliant**, adhering to a set of guidelines, common norms and social constructs, which allows for the functioning of daily life. Furthermore, a certain level of being **content** is key within a change process, in order to accept the imperfect nature of current realities (chapter 5).

Balancing the quality of being **emplaced** is that of being **distanced**: the ability of communities and initiatives to be conscious of, and harness relations to, people and places that are physically distant (Massey, 2004). The quality of being **distanced** corners with that of being **disconnected** under the dimension of **compassionate connection**. This is about looking at ourselves and others with compassionate awareness from a witness perspective (Gunnlaugson, 2007) in order to not exclusively identify with one particular ideology or perspective. To be **'reconnected'** refers to compassionately connecting with others (people as well as nonhuman beings). When we feel our life is connected to the life of that which suffers (human and non-human), we feel an urge to alleviate the suffering and ensure that our actions cause the least harm (Bannon, 1973; Pfattheicher et al., 2016).

The quality of being **re-connected** corners with the quality of being **convergent**, which reflects the social quality of the dimension of **creativity**: the ability of people to come together to do things, organize parts of their lives together and take social and collective action. Convergent creativity specifically acknowledges the value of materializing alternative ideologies as opposed to merely protesting, criticizing or sending knowledge into the world (Haluza-DeLay, 2008). This collective quality is balanced by that of being **divergent,** which is about embracing difference and authenticity and feeding this into the collective for it to be dynamic.

Cornering the quality of being 'divergent' is the quality of being **critical**, from the dimension of **transgression**. This involves not overidentifying with a specific community or place and maintaining a critical perspective. From divergence and authenticity, space is created to be critical towards taken-for-granted norms, values and institutions inside and outside the communities a person considers him/herself part of.

From these four dimensions, two axes emerge: *community* and *disruption*. Community is about forging authentic connections based on diversity; these connections converge to collectively manifest a vision. Disruption is about change, where 'internal disruption' is about the possibility to diverge from the idea of 'normal' in spaces that celebrate diversity.

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'External disruption' is about change brought about in wider societal structures through the practice of community itself. The presence of both *disruption* as well as *community* balances a PBTL process. Disruption involves friction, dissonance and possibly conflict, while the axis of community allows for recalibration, new relationships, and continuous evolvement through new constellations.

Theoretical contributions

Through the development of the PBTL framework, this thesis is, first of all, a response to a lack of critical and integrated research of transformation, a concept which ten years ago was lacking the backing of a well-developed theory and widely accepted set of practices, unlike similar sustainability 'buzzwords' including resilience and adaptation (O'Brien, 2012; Shove, 2010). Research on transformations has since increased, although there are still very few integrated theoretical frameworks.

The first paper of this thesis (chapter 4) includes a critical review of the theory of 'transformative learning', its origins, its uses, critical perspectives and different approaches and uses. This literature review identified some of the major points of critique concerning TL: a lack of attention to context, missing link between individual and social change and the centrality of rational, cognitive thought thereby dismissing multiple ways of knowledge and different types of intelligences. This research has attempted to address those points of critique by developing a place-based approach to TL, building on earlier attempts at developing a more integral approach to TL.

Existing research attempting at developing a more 'integral' approach to TL included, amongst others, the work of O'Sullivan and Taylor (2004) and, more recently, Chaves and Wals (2018) and Wals (2019), who developed an ecological perspective to TL, the work of Gunnlaugson (2005), who made the case for integrally informed theories of TL, and later on the work of Harmin, Barett and Hoessler (2017) and Lange (2018). As Lange (2018) argues in their paper on transforming transformative learning education, transformative learning theory has been/is at risk of becoming a stagnating theory (also argued by Taylor and Cranton (2013)) stuck in outdated paradigms based on dualist, reductionist and causal thinking. This thesis has contributed to the 'revitalization' of TL theory (Lange, 2018) by building onto insights from relational ontologies. By doing so, this research met the needs for stretching the epistemological and ontologies boundaries of TL (Harmin et al., 2017). This research thereby contributes to the ongoing 'transformation of transformative learning theory' by developing the place-based perspective to transformative learning that integrates insights form, what Lange (2018) refers to as the 'New Science'. The new sciences embrace a new materialist ontology grounded in quantum physics and living

system theories and embodying indigenous and Eastern ways of knowing as well as general, colonized, noncognitive forms of knowledge. The new sciences thereby are able to explain phenomena, such as a sense of interconnectedness, that traditional science cannot account for (Laszlo, 2008). This research has also gone beyond theoretical reflection to apply such a new perspective of transformative learning empirically. For example by including accounts of unacknowledged capacities like communicating with nature (e.g. trees, animals), including accounts of spirituality, intuition and other embodied ways of knowing.

Another response to the lack of attention to the link between more individual changes in perspective (classic TL) and structural and/or social change is the introduction of the concept of 'transgressive learning'. This research embraced the concept of transgressive learning in the first empirical paper as a result of empirical findings that did not fit either of the three initial dimensions of the existing theoretical framework (chapter 5). The data suggested that preceding connection, the learning journey of community members was in most cases initiated by a sense of critique, a feeling of uncomfortableness with current institutions, structures, economies and lifestyles (see chapter 5). This sense of critique is captured in the concept of transgressive learning: challenging dominant hegemonic structures. Complementary to challenging dominant structures is creating new ones, the second aspect of transgressive learning. This aspect was, although not explicitly, part of the place-based perspective to TL from the start, captured then in the dimension of creativity, described as translating the intangible or inner shifts in consciousness into tangible actions and explicit forms.

Transformative and transgressive learning have been thoroughly discussed in several insightful studies (James, 2019; Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2016; Macintyre et al., 2020; Ojala, 2016; Wals & Peters, 2017). However, many of these accounts remain based on extensive description (e.g. (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015) and thus far lack accessible, visual frameworks or tools that can be used to put insights into practice in (empirical) research. Furthermore, they mostly either discuss transformative or transgressive learning, rather than placing them together in one comprehensible framework. By bringing transgressive and transformative learning together in one conceptual framework, this research has contributed a useful conceptual tool that supports empirical data collection and analysis as well as (collective/community) learning processes and their facilitation. With this, it is one of few theoretical frameworks of transformative and transgressive learning, other examples being the Living Spiral model, developed by Martha Chaves, Dylan McGarry, Heila Lotz-Sisitka and Gibson Mphepo during the T-Learning workshop in New Delhi, India, November 2016 (Macintyre et al., 2019). This framework is more specifically directed at sustainability researchers and research processes, inviting a collaborative (transgressive) action research process. It is specifically designed to steer research and multi-stakeholder

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processes towards transgressive impacts, while also accounting for the more invisible (or inner) parts of transformative learning.

Practical contributions

The PBTL framework can be used as a hermeneutical tool to reflect on, facilitate, support and improve transformative learning processes in sustainability initiatives. The framework is a tool that helps to assess whether a learning process is well balanced in terms of attention paid to both individual as well as social learning, power and politics, local and global and inner and outer. It can thus be used by communities and other sustainability initiatives to 'assess' the state of their initiative or process: see what dimensions of place-based transformative learning are under or overrepresented, which ones require more attention. If the right questions are asked under each dimension and qualities, the framework also addresses the normative dimension of transformative learning by reflecting on the diversity of perspectives included, balance between critique and compliance, which actors are included and excluded in the learning process, how local embeddedness is related to global responsibility and so forth.

To support and inspire sustainability initiatives to use this framework in a responsible and inclusive manner, examples of questions to address under each dimension/quality are given below. Initiatives can also come up with their own questions under each quality, to ensure the analysis is tailored to their specific context. As the framework is grounded in empirical research on ecovillages, the questions linked to the dimensions and qualities in the framework are inspired by ecovillage practices. In this way this research has contributed to exploring the value of knowledge created in ecovillage initiatives for other sustainability initiatives and broader societal change processes.

Table 4. reflective questions for each dimension of PBTL

Dimension	Quality	Question/Reflection
Transgression	Compliant & content	Is there a common vision and is it known to, and supported by, everyone involved in the initiative? Who was included/excluded in creating the vision? Are there guidelines/rules which all individuals have agreed to that support the daily functioning of the initiative? Is there clarity on the most important underlying values upon which the initiative is based? Is everyone contributing in his or her own way to the common vision and common goals?
	Critical	Is there dedicated space for voicing and sharing alternative, contradictory or 'clashing' perspectives? How is critique handled and received (individually or on group level)? Is this initiative a response to a sense of critiquing hegemonic structures? If so how is, or could this be, integrated in the design and practices? Is there a 'protocol' for dealing with conflicts? Are there people in the initiative who have knowledge and experience in supporting the initiative through conflicts?
Creativity	divergent	Who is involved and who is excluded in the initiative and why? Has that been a conscious choice/process in the design or not? Are individuals supported in connecting to their individual uniqueness (character, qualities, opinions, skills, values, needs)? Is the nonhuman given a 'voice', if so how, if not, why not?
	convergent	Are there common projects or activities? How are they experienced and valued? Who is included and excluded from them and why? Can different perspectives successfully be integrated/exist next to each other in co-creative/co-operative processes or activities? Examples? Do individuals support each other's ideas and initiatives (both practically as well as emotionally)
Connection to place	Emplaced	What is the role of the nonhuman/relation to the nonhuman? Is the physical location of the initiative valued in any particular way or imbued with particular meaning? Is the initiative integrated in the local/regional context, culture, political/economic landscape?
	distanced	What is the quality of the relation between local and global? Is it based upon a sense of responsibility? Does the initiative have access to support, knowledge and inspiration from a broader network of likeminded initiatives?

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Dimension	Quality	Question/Reflection
Compassionate connection	disconnected	Is there attention and room for (individual) self-care, reflection and rest for everyone involved in the initiative? What are potential obstacles/barriers to this? Who has and who does not have access to the space and time needed to take care of themselves?
	(re) connected	Are there common moments of silence, reflection, contemplation, awe or if applicable, spiritual practice? Is there conscious attention for compassionate ways of communicating with each other? Is there a dedicated space and time for sharing? Can emotions and feelings be shared in a constructive matter and are they received in a compassionate way? Is there access to professional facilitators/community trainers to support communication processes in the community if needed?

Methodological reflections

As discussed in chapter 3, the methodological approach was organized along the lines of place-based research and new materialist inquiry, (phenomenological) ethnography, participatory research methods and narrative inquiry focusing on significant life experiences (SLE's).

Reflecting back on the methodological process, there are a few topics that specifically come to mind. First of all, in the very beginning I experimented with trying to integrate more sensory and visual aspects to the life-story interviews, in order to integrate principles from sensory ethnography (Pink 2009), intuitive inquiry (interpersonal research approaches) and in general more creative methods. As I felt rather inspired by the premises of transpersonal research methods, which offer an alternative perspective on knowledge generation, sources of knowledge and validity. This perspective allowed for the explicit inclusion of alternative modes of knowing, including for example intuiting, sensing or feeling in all phases of the research (Braud, 2004). I for example set out to make a kind of visual/conceptual 'mood' board for each community member I interviewed, in order to capture the impression and 'energy' of a particular person, which I could in a later stage use to tap into while analyzing the interview. In this way I tried to somehow elicit the more invisible forms of information you receive when being in the presence of another person. However, along the way I was a bit unsure how to integrate these mood boards in the analysis and what relevant information to retrieve from them. As the interviews themselves, through thematic coding, already provided a rich account of participants' learning journeys, I refrained from my initial idea to explicitly work with intuitive insights as well. I do still believe that intuition plays an important role in the

research process, informing decisions and providing guidance, in theory development as well as the practicalities around fieldwork. Working more explicitly with intuitive knowledge might be an interesting endeavor in future research projects. I also asked the first interviewees to 'draw along' during the life-story interviews so that in the end there would be a kind of visual map of the life-story learning journey. However, I soon observed that not all participants felt comfortable doing it and that it often distracted and disrupted the flow of the interview. I thus stopped asking this after two interviews

Apart from these two 'unsuccessful' ideas, I do feel that the methods chosen were appropriate and valuable and also reflected some of the key concepts from the theoretical approach. First of all, the methods allowed for an understanding of learning as situated and contextualized. Most research exploring significant life experiences (SLE's) for example, looks at singled out factors that lead to pro-environmental behaviour (Ceaser, 2015; Howell & Allen, 2016). This thesis on the other hand has tried to capture the complexity of how multiple dimensions and processes are linked and nested and how this makes up a continuous and dynamic learning process, rather than a linear cause and effect relationship. This research thus presents significant life experiences as part of entangled relational processes. Furthermore, a different methodology has been used to capture SLE's. In much research into SLE's participants are directly asked to describe experiences that motivated them to become e.g. an environmental educator, (e.g. Howell & Allen, 2016). Life-story interviews as well as the photovoice discussion sessions, on the other hand elicited a more complex and richer picture of people's life's where, while talking, experiences were touched upon that participants might have initially not recalled as significant in their life's journey.

Secondly, the particular methods used resonated with some of the main concepts of the theory underlying this research. Both life-story interviews and the participatory photovoice session were grounded in a sense of connection and immersion. By the time I started interviewing community members, I had already established a connection to previous visits to their community. Community members were thus familiar with me and my work and I was, to a certain extent, familiar with the context of their community. I often experienced the interviews as a meaningful conversation with a fellow human being, from which I learned as a researcher but perhaps even more so, as a person learning from other, often slightly older, people's lives. The interviews were always conducted at the ecovillage, and in some cases in people's own kitchen or living room over a glass of wine. Occasionally I would also share some parts of my own learning journey so far in relation to searching for a meaningful and sustainable way of living when it felt resonating. In one case, the interviewee asked me to share my life story as well in return for their interview. Apart from the 'data' that was collected during these interviews (through recordings and transcripts), the act itself already felt meaningful in and of itself, by taking time to take

genuine interest in someone else's life, including the difficulties, doubts, struggles and sadness. To share our stories with each other and have someone listening to yours was appreciated by many community members and further enhanced the relationship between me as a researcher and the communities.

The participatory photovoice sessions shared the same qualities of immersion and connection by providing a dedicated space and time for community members to come together and connect with each other. Many acknowledged that they felt spending this time with each other was valuable and sometimes not done enough. Furthermore, these sessions were grounded in a sense of compassion as well as being spaces that allowed participants to identify divergence and voice critique. This also came with the challenge of facilitating conversations around sensitive topics, which I will turn to when discussing the challenges and limitations. Mostly, these sessions emanated compassion, by creating a safe and structured space to share and listen to one another, without further agenda and to do's. As Ansa Palojärvi observed when she visited one of the sessions and helped out as translator: 'I saw compassion at work'[1].

The premises of place-based research and new materialism were reflected in two main ways. By understanding myself as being part of a 'research assemblage' (Fox & Alldred, 2015) rather than an objective outsider 'studying' communities and their members, I have tried to approach the research and the fieldwork as a research ensemble. In practice this means that fieldwork is a relational process which may have (transformative) impacts on me as researcher while at the same time my presence as researcher and as a person with particular qualities, characteristics and values influences the kind of material that is created in the research process, the content of the 'data' so to speak. Furthermore, understanding the research process as taking place in an 'ensemble' also requires from the researcher a letting go, at least to a degree, of control of the process and to allow for topics and themes that other actors bring to the ensemble to come in. This is also one of the basics of participatory research, to ensure research participants have space to take up topics that matter to them. The latter was specifically present in the photovoice method, in which participants were able to take pictures of places, situations and other things that were meaningful for them. With regards to the first issue, I have reflected upon my own process in an auto-ethnographic account of my experiences before and during this research.

Lastly having developed a relationship with particular places and spending time in them, I have, in some way or another, left my traces in them: understanding place as a relational dynamic entity that is constantly (re)-created, I have been part of these places

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1   Ansa Palojärvi, member of the ecovillage network Finland and the SUSPLACE consortium, during a reflective session about SUSPLACE project. SUSPLACE Final Event, Tampere, May 7th 2019

of the relationships that make up these places for a while. However, I do not know how and what kind of traces. I thus do not really know what has been the effect of the photovoice sessions on the social dynamics in the community. Or whether the life-story interviews and the photovoice sessions were empowering, or nurturing, perhaps even, therapeutic, and in what ways. This partly relates to the lack of an 'action' component, that is often part of participatory research approaches, or participatory action research (PAR). This could be seen as a limitation of this research, and would have been interesting to integrate in it with more time and resources available. This brings me to the challenges and limitations of the methodologies used.

First of all, the fact that I do not speak the Finnish language created some challenges, although it mostly did not appear to be a problem at all as almost all community members spoke English. However, for about three participants communicating in English was a challenge, which resulted in the interview taking a bit longer, community members feeling less confident in their ability to accurately describe their experiences, it required help of a dictionary in one case and in another case a fellow community member needed to be present to translate. Furthermore, in the community of Väinölä, not all members were comfortable communicating in English, which excluded a number of community members from participating in this research. Another challenge concerned navigating conflict situations in one of the communities as a researcher. This required the ability from my side to connect with both sides and navigate the space between discreetly and with respect towards all those involved. It resulted in organizing an extra photovoice session with one of the households in Kurjen Tila, as well as facilitating the other sessions among other community members who were disagreeing over how the conflict was handled as well as sharing their grievances and sadness over the situation. As a researcher/facilitator I aimed to keep a 'compassionate' space and the discussions insightful and meaningful without escalating nor dominating the whole session. In doing so, these sessions were grounded in some of the theoretical concepts of voicing critique, divergence, compassion and self-compassion and also immersion and connection. I made sure to create a safe and pleasant environment (putting out flowers, lightning a candle) and take time at the start of the sessions to check in, set the tone by letting everyone share with use of visual cards what was on their minds and how they were feeling, walking them through the principles of compassionate listening and thereby connect with each other before diving into potentially sensitive topics. This example also shows the complementary and sometimes even conflicting roles a researcher may have to take up in (transformative) sustainability science and place-based research, when research is no longer understood as an objective endeavor of collecting and analyzing data (Horlings et al., 2020)

Conclusions

This research set out to explore three research questions:

1. How does the dynamic between inner and outer co-produce sustainability in the context of an ecovillage?
2. What kind of learning characterizes this dynamic?
3. Does this learning hold 'signs' of transformation and transgression? To what extend can this learning be considered transformative/transgressive?

In this last section I will reflect upon all three questions and answer them as best as possible based on the insights that emerged from the literature and empirical research conducted for this thesis.

Sustainability in the context of an ecovillage is a dynamic and relational process in which inner and outer change become mutually reinforcing properties.
To start with the first research question, this thesis shows how transformative learning lies in the encounter between what we generally consider our 'inner' world and the 'outer' world, which 'intra-act' in a dynamic relationship. The research shows how significant life experiences (SLE's), events or a general sense of discomfort in 'conventional' work/school/private spaces can trigger processes of critical reflection, shift our relationship to our bodies and senses as well as to other beings and the material world around us. A central aspect of the resulting learning process, is the shift towards a more embodied and connected state of being, opening up possibilities for a shift away from a modern consciousness towards a more integral or ecological consciousness. Through the analysis of life-story interviews and participatory photographic methods with members from three different ecovillages (Kurjen Tila, Väinölä en Tamera), this research explored this learning process and defined it as 'place-based transformative learning'. In the case of this research, place-based transformative learning involved not only shifts in mental perspectives, the quality of the relationship to the body, senses and 'inner world' but also shifts in behaviour, practices and relationships as manifested in the daily living in an ecovillage.

The research showed that this ecovillage lifestyle is often grounded in a critical attitude towards unsustainable societal structures perpetuating social and ecological injustices. Developing a critical perspective showed to be interrelated to becoming more attuned to, and sensitive of, the 'outer' world. Shown in this research, and supported by insights from for example research on self-compassion, a greater sense of connection to the world around us nurtures an increased awareness of the suffering of, and in, this world. In their learning journey, current community members started reflecting upon what they

witnessed in the world as a result of being emotionally touched by it. This process of reflection involved calling into question internalized perspectives and identities and triggered a motivation to act. The research also showed that becoming more sensitive to the suffering within and outside requires the capacity to integrate uncomfortable feelings and emotions that accompany this increased sensitivity.

As the participants of this research all shared the common characteristic of being a member of an ecovillage, their learning journeys included a search for people and places that resonated with their transforming consciousness. Two main motives for joining a community arose from the data:

1. To enhance a (newfound) sense of connection, meaning and wellbeing through a communal lifestyle
2. To seek for ways to actively support change in order to alleviate social and ecological injustices

Although the PBTL process of community members started before they joined a community, it often intensified while living in community. Apart from getting familiar with the practical sides of community living, community members also described an intense learning process with regards to social and relational skills, confrontation with uncomfortable/painful feelings, emotions and thoughts, living communally after having been used to a more individualistic lifestyle and dealing with challenges, setbacks and conflicts. Based on the insights from this research, this might be particularly true in the first years of developing a community. Kurjen Tila, being by far the newest community of the three participating communities, experienced significant challenges in trying to work through conflict as community. Tamera and Väinölä, having existed as communities for over 40 years, seemed to have integrated structures that facilitate the community in communicating, decision making and conflicts. This brings me to the second research question, as developing functioning structures to work through conflicts and support communication and decision making can also be understood as the development of certain capacities and skills that support an effective PBTL process.

PBTL is characterized by four types of learning: instantaneous, meta-cognitive, affective and acquiring capacities & skills
Different types of learning and phases in the learning process are not separate entities logically following up on each other, but rather are dynamically interwoven. For mere theoretical purposes four different types of learning can be distilled from the research findings.

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The first type of learning can be framed as *'instantaneous learning'*, or learning triggered by a significant experience. In this type of learning there is a specific trigger that can be identified as stimulating a process of reflection, searching and learning. Triggers identified in this research include personal experience of oppression, witnessing historic events, witnessing suffering of other beings or places (directly or indirectly through multimedia), reading a book, experiencing a sense of being 'out of place' in professional or personal environments, experiencing a sense of community and meeting inspiring people/role models. Although a process as abstract as 'learning' cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect relationships, the above described factors did seem to have a pivotal effect on the learning journey of community members.

A second type of learning that often follows from instantaneous learning is based on critical reflection or *'meta-cognitive' learning*. This type of learning involves making sense of experiences, reflecting upon experiences or events and placing them in a broader perspective. This type of learning is mostly cognitive and most resembles the traditional definition of transformative learning as a shift in perspective (Kitchenham, 2008). It involves reflecting upon ones' given identity, position in society, geo-political environment and history, culture and the relationship of all these factors with the current state of the world and envisioned future. This phase is characterized by disassociating to a certain extent with internalized worldviews and instead become aware of new spaces of possibility. Furthermore, central in this phase is the development of a critical attitude towards unsustainable hegemonic structures and a resulting urge to counter these.

The third type of learning is *affective learning*. Affective learning builds onto meta-cognitive learning and is about sensing things differently instead of merely seeing or understanding things differently. This type of learning is an embodied type of learning and involves the embodied, sensuous experience of significant moments and insights as well as the development of an increased sensitivity towards the world around, resulting in what Otto Scharmer (in Senge et al., 2005) refers to as a deeper experience of reality.

The fourth type of learning has a more practical character and is about developing the capacities and skills to a) cope with, and integrate change and b) manifest a different awareness or consciousness into the material reality (through new or changed (societal) practices and/or structures, behaviour, relationships and lifestyle choices). Specific skills that came out of the research: self-compassion and compassion for others in the process of change, skills and capacities that enable life in a community including compassionate communication, conflict mediating, practical skills, creative problem solving as well as creative outlets for self-expression.

PBTL process shows signs of transformation and transgression

This research looked at place based transformative learning, which involves the concepts of both transformative as well as transgressive learning and is not considered transformative without tangible 'signs'. The above paragraph about capacities and skills already embodies some of these signs of transformation/transgression in the form of new capacities and skills that support a life in an ecovillage. The most obvious sign that the learning journey of community members is, or has been transformative, is their actual living in the ecovillage and the choice they have made for an 'alternative' way of living. On a more personal level this can be understood as transformative in itself. However, by including the concept of transgression, there is another question concerning the potential transformative impact of sustainability initiatives like ecovillages on broader societal structures. This research identifies a number of signs that point at the transformative and transgressive potential of ecovillages in opening up spaces of possibility showing how another way of relating to each other and the planet is possible.

First of all, all three communities host visitors, some just a few occasionally, others on an organized and regular basis. All these short- or long-term visitors and volunteers get a taste of the community lifestyle through involvement in daily practices, educational courses, community gatherings and the general experience of residing in the community place and space. I myself, have been such a visitor while staying in the communities as a researcher. I have described my personal experiences of these visits in the chapter 7. Besides visitors, communities are connected to each other, through wider networks, as well as to local, regional and national 'neighbours'. For example, by collaborating with local and regional food producers, local activist groups, researchers and politicians and sometimes by getting involved in developing new regulations for e.g. sustainable buildings, sewage systems. Another possible sign of transformation can be seen in the way communities are increasingly organized in international networks and collaborate with likeminded movements who aim towards similar goals though with a different approach. Working together increases their power/agency to influence for example regional political processes.[2] Furthermore, seeking the support and knowledge of like-minded communities and networks can strengthen the transformative capacity of an individual community. As a member of Kurjen Tila mentioned, participating in a broader network is, 'really empowering' (chapter 6). Exchanging ideas and supporting each other in areas like decision making, conflict management and communication, contributes to functioning and thriving communities. In this way, collaboration, which is not necessarily a sign of transformation as it is usually between like-minded people, can indirectly, strengthen the

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2   An example is Ecolise, the European Network for Community led initiatives. Ecolise is strategically based in Brussels and one of its strategic goals is to expand 'public and political awareness of the potential of empowered communities to positively transform societies and to help reach ambitious local to global level policy goals'. https://www.ecolise.eu/about-ecolise/

transformative potential of communities. The transformative potential of communities, besides the potential ripple effect through education and visitors, lies in alternative practices that embody a critique towards hegemonic structures. These practices might be social, technological or activist in nature and additionally, often have a place-based character. All communities showed to be involved in some sort of activism, either locally and in the case of Tamera also globally. Activist activities ranged from denying military service, to protesting against oil drills.

Apart from such activities we generally label as a form of activism, other 'counter' practices embody a sense of critique as well, including alternative ways of farming (based on permaculture or biodynamic principles and a sense of 'caring' for the soil) and landscape design/management. Apart from food production, the community of Tamera transformed the whole landscape of their community through ecosystem restoration practices. These practices were built on co-operation with the natural world instead of extraction, domination and control. By 'caring' for the soil and creating space for water, the community observed how nature responds with abundance. These practices show signs of transgression by approaching the natural world differently from the way we have generally been used to. From a one way relationship in which humans dominate and extract the non- human world, to a two way relationship based on respect, communication, reciprocity and not unimportantly, gratitude for the way the nonhuman world provides for us. The design of off-grid technologies are another example. In Tamera, the design process is not informed by economic incentives but by the intention to support life without being dependent on conventional 'on the grid' technologies that might not be too sustainable. By decoupling innovation from commercial viability and conventional structures, a different kind of technological creativity arises, one that can be build and maintained by communities themselves, is user friendly and fits for example off grid places in e.g. the global south.

The last signs of transformation are less visible, but rendered as important, or even more important than the more visible signs according to some community members. These signs specifically refer to the relationship between inner processes of transformation, social relationships and material/outer manifestations of such changes at the personal/inner and social level. In this way, working towards changing unsustainable structures in the outer world, starts with changing 'violent' structures at the level of our inner worlds. The effect this has on the way we relate to ourselves, shifts our social relations which might hence have a ripple effect by shifting to different societal structures that grounded in for example nonviolent ways of communication, different methods of decision making and new forms of more inclusive governance.

All these signs can be understood as seeds of a future that is 'waiting to emerge' (Scharmer, 2009).

Limitations, ethics, risks and avenues for future research

Although resulting from a conscious choice made in the research approach, a limitation of this research is its limited attention to the role and impact of pervasive (hegemonic) structures on transformative learning processes and vice versa. Overlooking structural barriers to transformative change has been identified as one of the risks of the transformation discourse by Blythe et al. (2018). They argue that the ambiguity around the concept 'transformation' may result in researchers and policy makers putting too much emphasis on the capacity of individuals and communities affected by climate change to set in motion transformative change rather than holding the institutions that caused the problems in the first place accountable.

As mentioned in the introduction, I have consciously chosen to look at the opportunities and possibilities provided by small, at times marginal initiatives and undervalued and sometimes partly 'invisible' processes like inner change. For this reason, this research has not deeply engaged with more structural questions, even though these have been mentioned and acknowledged. I thereby made the choice to not stay stuck on structuralist obstacles by 'assuming certain structural stabilities' (Law & Urry, 2004: 404) thereby consciously disregarding the argument that dominant structures will inevitably overpower local initiatives (Gibson-Graham 2008). Instead, I made the ethical, political and partly ontological choice to 'reread for difference' (ibid), looking for possibilities that do not necessarily fit existing and dominant views on how the world or societies' function or should function, dismissing everything outside of those views as marginal and without impact. Since knowledge production is always partly an act of activism I choose to think about the often-invisible processes of inner change that underly, and are an intrinsic part of, changes in lifestyle and the creation of actual places embodying alternative lifestyles. This means choosing to look beyond structural perceived 'impossibility' to ethical possibility where I understand places as well as 'structures' not as fixed enclosed entities but as constantly produced and reproduced by the practices of emplaced and embodied humans, nonhumans as well as material characteristics (e.g. Massey's (2004) work Geographies of responsibility). From this understanding of relationality, changes 'within' are related to changes 'without'. Research can aim to find clues on how to perform 'diverse economies' or diverse practices of living based on a 'Love of the world' (Hannah Arendt) rather than masterful knowing or moralistic detachment (Gibson-Graham 2008).

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Furthermore, this research is based upon a general accepted argument in transition studies as well as place-based research that local initiatives, or 'niche innovations' can lead to structural change (Geels, 2010). Nevertheless, if more time, resources and know-how were available, the research findings could have been strengthened by including data on the scope of influence of ecovillages, both as separate entities as well as organized in larger networks. This could for example include analysis of the interaction of communities with local, regional, national and international government institutions including the impact of lobbying on legislation and laws and political agendas.

Another interesting avenue could be to trace the relations with local and regional (food) producers, activist groups, nature conservation initiatives, and lastly the outreach of educational activities. So, although research pointing out the inventiveness and agency of citizens to spur transformative change is of vital importance, this should not distract us from also demanding responsibility and accountability of institutional actors responsible for a large share of the climate change problematics.

Another limitation of this study involves its debatable status as post-qualitative research (see Markula 2019, Scharmer 2019). New materialism/relational ontology offers the ontological ground upon which the methodology is based which inspired me as a researcher to intentionally address the material and nonhuman in this research. However, because the methodology initially was not designed to specifically suit a new materialist inquiry, it is questionable whether or not this research can be considered post-qualitative. It does have characteristics that can also be found in new materialist inquiry, i.e. a specific awareness and acknowledgement of the influence of the material world on member's lived experience/experiences of transformation, the intra-actions between members and their nonhuman environment (Markula, 2019). However, these topics are all explored from a human perspective. No data entirely based upon nonhuman entities was collected (e.g. soil samples, study the behaviour of animals, track biodiversity). This is however, not necessarily needed for new materialist inquiry, another possibility is *"close reading of data sources to identify possible relations (which may be human, nonhuman or abstract) within assemblages, and how these affect or are affected by each other" (Fox & Alldred 2017, p. 172)*. As Mannion (2019) argues, 'there is little rigorous, in-depth or detailed advice on how post-qualitative research is to be empirically conducted.', which makes it debatable whether or not particular research can be considered post-qualitative.

Designing research into transformative and transgressive learning based on post-qualitative/new materialist principles could be an interested endeavour to deepen this body of research and give more substance and acknowledgement to the agency of nonhuman entities in place-based TL, better understanding for example how the nonhuman responds to changes in human behaviour/how the nonhuman supports/triggers/invites shifts in

consciousness/behaviour. New materialist inquiry and place-based research ideally uses a mixed method approach whereby qualitative as well as quantitative research is carried out (see Fox & Alldred 2015) and combined. In the context of this research, it could for example have been interesting to collaborate with quantitative methods to collect data on the environmental changes in Tamera (biodiversity indicators, soil samples, water content and quality), neurological research on spiritual experience or the effect of 'green care' on human bodies, biological inquiry into the behaviour and wellbeing of animals, or quantitative assessment of qualities like compassion and self-compassion (compassion scale). In this case theory thus forgoes practice, although new materialist principles and concepts have been theoretically integrated in this research, this research is not an example of a well established post-qualitive empirical practice.

Lastly, as already pointed at in the methodological chapter, this research could have been more empowering by the addition of an 'action' component to the participatory research approach taken. The photovoice process could have been complemented with an additional step by combining it with actually facilitating a community learning process, especially in the context of one of the communities who were seeking for such support and guidance. This however would ideally require the collaboration with a professional facilitator specialized in community processes. Such a collaboration might have been a very interesting endeavour and good be considered for future research on topics like these.

Furthermore, the photovoice is also particularly suitable to bridging insights to for example policy makers (in the case of photovoice this is often done with organizing an exhibition). As I do believe policymakers can learn from the experiences of ecovillages when it comes to inviting and supporting a society to transition towards more sustainable ways of living and organization. However, every research project has its possibilities and impossibilities, even though researcher increasingly take up multiple roles during a research project (Horlings et al. 2019). Apart from time and budget constraints, not every researcher has the needed knowledge, qualities and capacities for every possible role and thus choices need to be made. The possibility for integrating an action component to research does relate to ethical considerations. What are you able to give in return for the effort and time communities put in this research project? How to ensure it is a reciprocal relationship? Is it ethical in case it is not a reciprocal relationship? Who decides when it is or isn't? Who reaps the benefits of this research? These questions remain partly unanswered for this research. Including an action component might create a more tangible reciprocal relationship in this regard.

Epilogue

As a world's population, we might be on a crossroad to either an extremely uncertain future in which vast majorities of the world's population will see their livelihoods destroyed as a result of men induced climate change or to a future in which we manage to turn the tide. At such a time in history, research exploring how we might manage to 'turn the tide' as communities and as societies seems to me to be no luxury. As it becomes increasingly clear that it is not a lack of plans, strategies, ideas or technologies that is holding us back from making the required changes, we need to better understand what drives people to change, what helps them change, what keeps them sane during change, how they benefit from change and how we can change together in solidarity rather than in hostility and estrangement. Furthermore, as this research repeatedly states, and, indeed shows, change towards ecologically just and inclusive societies requires a worldview or consciousness that understands humans as part of the ecosystems and social communities through which they are connected with each other and the more-than-human world. Our presently hegemonic modern consciousness is grounded in an industrial worldview of efficiency and maximization, componentiality, novelty, information overload and rationality that supports a perception of the world as consisting of separate, 'inanimate or soulless' entities that can be used and misused for the purpose of extraction, exploitation and (economic) growth and development. This research provides some clues that might help in transgressing this hegemonic modern consciousness derived from communities who already have quit drastically changed their outlook on the world and their way of life. All three communities participating in this research, have, in their own particular ways, internalized a more 'enchanted' or spirited worldview based on a reverence for life and everything that facilitates life as well as the mystery of that which we consider to be beyond life. From this reverence for life, and death for that matter, everything is perceived as 'sacred' or spirited, and intrinsically connected to ones' own life. This invites a lifestyle that respects everything that lives, has lived, and supports life. This requires a different approach to life compared to one based on the premises of economic growth, competition and dualism. I therefor think that learning to perceive all life and matter as intrinsically valuable and spirited, lies at the basis of the fundamental and transformative changes that are required of us in order to facilitate socially just, unaggressive and safe processes of change triggered by climate change and injustice.

Such changes are needed in all parts of our societies, including and not the least, in our academic institutions. I therefor support research that tries to stretch the boundaries of traditional (western) academic paradigms by rethinking what is considered to be valid knowledge and sound methodology as well as critically reflecting upon who asks what questions and why, and who interprets 'data' through what internalized 'lens'. With this research I have tried to contribute to this kind of new 'thinking' by shedding light

on initiatives grounded in relational ontologies which harbour a lot of traits from for example indigenous ontologies. I have also tried to integrate different types of knowledge by considering feelings, intuitive insights, experiences and memories as valid knowledge. Furthermore, I have considered myself not as an objective outsider, but as an 'embodied researcher' doing this research with, and as part of, the communities that participated. To better understand what this means for research, chapter seven reflected upon my own personal learning journey. By doing so, I hope to encourage those who come after me to not shy away from conducting research that is intimately connected to your personal story, experiences, dreams and intuitive insights.

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Summary

This thesis started with a personal and academic interest in the merits of (self) compassion. Upon realizing that a personal practice of cultivating more self-compassion can have positive effects that stretch far beyond the self, I was intellectually triggered to unravel the relationship between changes in the 'inner' or personal realms and changes in the outer world. I started to pose myself the question whether the solution to many of the interlinked issues I had been working on before (poverty, food and nutrition security, international development cooperation, sustainability) lacked a fundamental piece of the puzzle, namely the need for shifts in the very personal and inner dimensions of ourselves as citizens in these times and as products of our cultural histories. Could it be that the crisis we witness in the outer world reflects the state of our inner worlds?

Via existing research on the inner dimension of exploring the role of culture, values and worldviews in relation to sustainability, as well as transition research identifying factors that aid or hamper the transition towards more sustainability societies, I came upon theories of 'transformative learning' in relation to sustainability. The ecological perspective to transformative learning posing that the transition towards more sustainable societies requires a shift from a modern towards an ecological consciousness, became the starting point of this thesis.

Ecovillages have been identified as places that engage with this 'inner dimension of sustainability' and they have also shown to be able to embrace radically different lifestyles with a drastically lower ecological footprint. As such, they are excellent places to involve in researching processes of transformative learning towards more sustainable societies.

I refer to ecovillages as examples of 'sustainability initiatives' and point at the need to more explicitly address context in researching sustainability initiative's as well the need to better understand the learning processes that underpin them . Addressing context also involves unravelling the relationship between 'inner' processes of change, which has traditionally been the focus of transformative learning theory, and structural changes, or the manifestation of changes at the inner level in the 'outer' world.

This thesis has aimed to address these shortcomings in sustainability research through the following research questions:

1. How does the dynamic between inner and outer co-produce sustainability in the context of an ecovillage?
2. What kind of learning characterizes this dynamic?

3. Does this learning process hold 'signs' of transformation and transgression? To what extend can this learning be considered transformative/transgressive?

In chapter two I present the major theoretical ideas that underpin this research, presented as the meta-theoretical framework of this thesis. I describe the theoretical journey of this thesis that initially started with a personal interest in the idea of self-compassion. As this personal interest evolved into an academic quest to unravel the relationship between personal or inner change and changes in our outer world, I embraced the concept of transformative learning. Chapter four critically reviews transformative learning theories and identifies the major points of critique. In order to address the points of critique, and inspired by place-based research, I employ a place-based approach to transformative learning, which includes, among other features, a recognition of a critical attitude towards hegemonic structures and the aim of changes those. In chapter 5 I learn that this aspect of transformative learning has been defined as transgressive learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). By diving deeper into the relational understanding of place and the entangled nature of every (living) thing, I get acquainted with new materialism (Gamble et al., 2019) and proceed to identify new materialism as the ontological foundation of the research.

In chapter three I outline the methodological approach of this thesis, phenomenological ethnography. The approach was operationalized by conducting life-story interviews, participatory photovoice sessions and autoethnographic inquiry. I used narrative inquiry to analyse the interview transcripts, photovoice transcripts and my own fieldnotes and memories, specifically focusing on 'significant life experiences' (SLE's). The three communities that actively participated in this research were Kurjen Tila in Finland, Väinölä in Finland and Tamera in Portugal. The chapter provides a description of each community and its basic characteristics.

Chapter four is a published theoretical paper and critically reviews theories of transformative learning (Pisters et al., 2019). In this chapter I first outline the origin and basic premises of theories of transformative learning and then turn towards the major points of critique. These include a lack of attention to context, a merely western focus and a lack of insight into the relationship between individual and social learning. I then propose a place-based approach to transformative learning and identify three 'building blocks' of this 'place-based approach to transformative learning' (PBTL) based on existing literature: compassion, connection and creativity.

Chapter five, consisting of the second published paper, presents the first empirical study exploring PBTL processes of individual community members from all three communities (Pisters et al., 2020). Based on the life-story interviews, this chapter empirically explores

the three dimensions identified in chapter four. The learning experiences identified under each dimension are further categorized in affective learning experiences, meta-cognitive learning experiences, capacities and skills and challenges. In addition to the three initial dimensions, the chapter introduces a fourth dimension that emerged from the empirical analysis: transgression that seemed to be a prerequisite for connection, namely the will and initial motivation to transgress current dysfunctional systems. The article then presents the new visual framework of PBTL as a four-dimensional process which place more emphasis on the dimensional character of the now four dimensions of PBTL. As the results show, the learning journey of participants is a continuous process of consciously moving towards the favourable side of a certain dimension and overcoming obstacles and challenges that interfere with this process. All four dimensions then embrace two sides of a continuum.

In chapter six, the third published paper, I move towards a community perspective to explore PBTL at community level (Pisters et al., 2022). The empirical data from life-story interviews and photovoice sessions from three ecovillages is analysed and discussed, using the now four-dimensional framework of PBTL. The results support, illustrate and deepen the meaning of the four dimensions of the theoretical framework: connection to place, compassionate connection, creativity and transgression. They show how the co-existence of 'community' and 'disruption' is essential in PBTL where community brings connection, cohesion and stability to a change process whereas disruption paves the way for disrupting old structures and experiment with new ones. In this chapter I show how a change in inner consciousness is related to alternative practices and structures that re-define relationships with ourselves, other humans and the material, more-than-human world.

In chapter seven I reflect upon my own learning processes prior to and during this research. Using an autoethnographic approach I first discuss how a period of personal upheaval, change and (transformative) learning inspired me to researching the inner dimension of sustainability. I then proceed by discussing how this learning process continued and deepened throughout the research as a result my engagement with particularly scholarly works and theories and my experiences in the three communities during fieldwork. I argue that autoethnographic inquiry can invite accountability among researchers, open up new spaces of inquiry and harness empathy for the experiences of research participants. Autoethnographic inquiry can also shed light on how intuitive and emotional knowledge provides useful research insights or confirmation as well as clarity on how personal values inform your research. Furthermore, self-inquiry requires an intimate connection to one's physical body and the willingness to be vulnerable. Both of these virtues support building meaningful and intimate relationships. Lastly, I argue that autoethnographic inquiry can be one of many means to practice integrity in relation to one's research by not only putting a spotlight on others but turn towards one self as well.

In chapter eight I summarize the main findings, theoretical and practical contributions and methodological reflections. I discuss what I have learned about the individual learning journeys of community members, which usually start with a sense of critique which leads to a search for connection which in turn is a pre-requisite for cultivating compassionate relationships and create new realities that are not harmful to anyone or anything but instead regenerative. This overlaps with 'learning as a community' which involves the integration of the non-human in the meaning and practice of community, embedding daily practices in natural cycles, harnessing the mutual relationship with the environment, dealing with social conflict and dissonance and walking the line between focusing inward and outward. I then proceed by showing that through autoethnographic inquiry I learned that in order to address the systems that I wish to see changed, I need to address myself, and the way I organize my life and relationships as well. Theoretically this research has contributed to existing theories of transformative learning by developing a theoretically sound and empirically useful framework of place-based transformative learning. Practically, the PBTL framework can be used as a hermeneutical tool to reflect on, facilitate, support and improve transformative learning processes in sustainability initiatives. Methodologically, I reflect on some innovative ideas I tried to integrate in the methodological approach but failed to do so and discuss how the methodological approach reflected the main theoretical concepts of PBTL.

I end the section by concluding that sustainability in the context of an ecovillage is a dynamic and relational process in which inner and outer change become mutually reinforcing properties. The learning that underpins this relational process is characterized by four types of learning: instantaneous, meta-cognitive, affective and acquiring capacities & skills. In the end this thesis depicts place-based transformative learning that shows signs of transformation and transgression.

Acknowledgements

'Let me keep my distance, always, from those who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say, "Look!" and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads.' – Mary Oliver

What I love most about social science is that most of the time, we don't provide a final answer. We closely describe what we see happening around us and offer frames and perspectives through which to observe this world. Sometimes new frames or perspectives, other times we dig up old frames or perspectives that might have been forgotten by most of us. This approach helped me to try to make sense again of a world that often does not make a lot of sense to me.

I've encouraged myself to look again, perhaps a little closer, paying a bit more attention to the smaller things. By doing this, I find my way back to all the beauty in this world, to the life that finds a way, always, and to the people who are determined to create a world that makes sense again. And this is what I've tried to do in this thesis; closely observe and get to know people who are determined to create a world based on a vision in which human communities live in a way that is meaningful, sustainable and in harmony with nonhuman life. And for me, this thesis is an act of gratitude for their work.

As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, giving thanks is one of the most important tasks we have as human beings on this planet. Giving thanks as a way of reciprocating everything the natural world gives us for free: oxygen, sunlight, water, air, food, beauty and company. Be it with your actions, with your words, with your work or simply with your attention. This research is my way of giving thanks.

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About three hours before the application deadline for the SUSPLACE program closed, I decided to give it a go and composed an application letter in less than an hour for the research project: Ecovillages and Sustainable Living. For some reason the first and only of the fifteen research projects I led eyes on. A few weeks earlier a friend pointed my attention to the SUSPLACE program suggesting it might be of interest to me. I then dismissed her suggestion fairly quickly, especially after hearing her mention that it was supposed to be 'quite an ambitious program'. At that point in my life I had become a bit weary of highly ambitious (study) programs and was not really planning on going for a PhD either. For some reason though, in a moment of boredom I guess, I landed on the

SUSPLACE website a few weeks later, a few hours before the application deadline closed. My attention was drawn to the research project about ecovillages and I did not even read the other fourteen interesting research projects (I still do not know why), before deciding that I would give it a shot.

Long story short, after an interview and position paper, which I decided to write in a way that was as close to me personally as possible, I was selected for the position of early stage researcher. I was surprised and excited and at the same time not actually surprised at all: the whole process had been so relatively effortless and even joyful, that it just felt like the right fit for me. Aniek Hebinck, you might not even remember it anymore, but it was you who referred me to the SUSPLACE program and I'm grateful you did!

Hilkka and Katriina, you were the ones initially seeing potential in my approach to this topic, thank you for inviting me to come to Finland and work at LUKE on this project!

Hilkka you have been the most wonderful supervisor. With your calmness and trust you let me go off and find my own way in this research. Even if my ideas were not always completely crystalized yet when I showed them to you the first times around, you had enough trust to let me continue figure it out until they actually turned out to make sense. This way of working, in freedom, often solitude and with enough space to be creative and contemplative was the perfect fit for me. Besides your calmness and confidence, there also always was a simmering passion and curiosity for the research themes we were exploring, and I feel it was a joy for both of us to dig deeper into some topics that were close to our hearts. Your never failed to positively comment on my work before pointing at those aspects that needed some revision or improvements. Working with you has been a joy, thank you!

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Ina, your energy and enthusiasm are a joy to be around. And your way of integrating this in everything you do an inspiration.

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To the thesis committee members, Ina Horlings, Bettina Bock, Meghann Ormond and Flor Avelino, who showed interested in my work and were willing to carefully read through all of, thank you!

SUSPLACE consortium: thank you for your open-mindedness, the inspiring meetings, the joyful dinners and the passion you put into your work, next to your willingness to keep learning and changing. I've been inspired!

Angela & Sara I could not have wished for better company in Finland, thank you for brining the Italian vibes to the far north! Sara, your positive and steady nature were always a supportive presence. Angela, your dedication to your work, friends and life in general never ceases to amaze me. You are an inspiration! I hope to meet again soon (when my pregnant state allows me to) and get to know your beautiful daughter too.

Apart from having Angela and Sara as closest 'colleagues', I felt so fortunate to be part of the broader 'SUSCREW' community: Anke, Kelli, Omer, Allessandro, Diogo, Marta, Anastasia, Catia, Marie, Elgars, Andris, Alice, Lorena, Malin, Marie, Allana. I've loved being part of this group, truly it has been a privilege to get to know all of you. Even though it may take me a little longer to immerse myself fully in a new group of people, I've felt so at home amongst you when time went by. Our many dinners together, conversations, lively discussions and the energy and dedication of all you have been heartwarming to me. Anke, thank your for being the most compassionate and creative project coordinator we could have wished for, and for also being my paranimf for this defence! Omer, thank you for your hugs and friendship. Elgars & Diogo, I felt so cosy staying in the cottage together with you in Cardiff. Alessandro, thank you for trusting me with your car. Marta, thank you for your support and loving words, also over the last few years. I really hope we will meet again soon! Kelli, your creative mind and way of approaching life have always inspired me.

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I owe a special thanks to all the communities that welcomed me literally into their homes, I've been warmed by your hospitality, your courage and wisdom. Keuruu, Katajamäki, Ihala, Livonsaari, Gaia, Suderbyn; special thanks to Robert Hall for your dedication to this work, your interest in this research and your contribution to the final event of our SUSPLACE project. Small footprint, Lilerou and all those present at the GEN conference in the community of Arterra (July 2016), this conference was one of the first times I got aquainted with the world of ecovillages and I loved every bit of it. Gilbert, Samuel and Itaal, I did not know a friendship that was formed in just a few days could feel so valuable.

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About the author

Siri Pisters was born on the 12th of June 1990 in a village in the south of the Netherlands. After her primary school years, she followed bilingual pre-university education and went on to study 'Nutrition and Health' at Wageningen University. After completing her bachelor, in which she decided to focus on food and nutrition security in the global south, she continued her academic schooling with a master degree in Development and Rural Innovation, also at Wageningen University. She specialized in rural sociology and spent half a year in Uganda to experience working at the food security cluster of the Netherlands Embassy in Kampala and conducted her thesis research with rice farming community in the eastern wetlands of Uganda. She focused on the impact of the privatization of wetlands on the livelihoods of rural communities. During and advanced masters program in international development (AMID) at the Radboud University, a traineeship combining four days of work at the Center of Development and Innovation (CDI-WUR), she delved deeper into the (geo) political nature of international development. During her time at the CDI she worked on projects related to food and especially nutrition security.

After completing the AMID traineeship, she was admitted to the Marie Curie ITN research project 'Sustainable Place Shaping' from 2016-2019 for which she worked at the Natural Resource Institute in Helsinki, Finland and travelled throughout Europe to learn from different ecological communities.

Besides researching transformative learning process she has involved in developing and facilitating processes for transformative engagement through arts based methods. As co-founder of 'Re.imagenary' she aims to support organizations, institutions, communities or teams that are passionate about exploring their potential or strengthening their capacity as transformative change agents.

The philosophy of yoga is weaved through all of the work that she does and she is very passionate about building bridges between (sustainability) research and spirituality and 'personal' development and societal transformation. Siri completed the 200-hour Purna Yoga Teacher Training in Helsinki in February 2019. In 2020/21 she took the Reiki I & II courses at the Healing Space (Bussum, the Netherlands).

At the moment Siri works as a researcher at the HZ University of Applied Sciences, in Vlissingen, the Netherlands. She works for a small research institute (HZ Kenniscentrum

Zeeuwse Samenleving), which focuses on the quality of life of people living in the province of Zeeland.

For more information visit her website: www.siripisters.nl and www.reimaginary.com/

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Training and supervision plan

Siri Pisters
Wageningen School of Social Sciences (WASS)
Completed Training and Supervision Plan (TSP)

LIST OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Name of the learning activity	Department/ Institute	Year	Credits (ECTS) (1 cr. = 28 hrs)
Category A) Project related competences (managing your own research project)			
A1. Managing a research project (research project skills) – min 6 ECTS			
1. BS1–SUSPLACE Introduction Course	SUSPLACE	2016	0,5
2. BS3–Research Skills	SUSPLACE	2016	1
3. Research proposal approval	RSO/WUR/SUSPLACE	2016	6
4. AS2 – Communication and Dissemination	SUSPLACE	2017	1
A2. Integrating research in the corresponding discipline (in-depth training) – min 12 ECTS			
1. PS1 – Sustainability project skills	Ecxept	2016	1,5
2. BS2 – Spatial Thinking in the Social Sciences	WASS	2016	4
3. BS4 – Facilitation of Place-Based Development	RHDHV	2016	1,5
4. AS1- Sustainable Place Shaping	SUSPLACE	2017	2
5. BS5 – Writing Techniques	SUSPLACE	2016	1
6. AS3 – Sustainability Science and Place Shaping	SUSPLACE	2018	1
7. AS4- Spatial Development in Science, Policy and Society	SUSPLACE	2018	1
Category B) General research related competences (becoming a broad academic)			
B1. Placing research in a broader scientific (social sciences and WUR) context (interdisciplinary overview) – min 6 ECTS			
1. AS5 – SUSPLACE Autumn School – Shaping Places Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries	SUSPLACE/University of Aveiro	2017	2
2. Organizing SUSPLACE Final Conference	SUSPLACE/LUKE	2019	3
3. Online Course 'Global Revolution and the Healing of Love'	Tamera	2016	1,5
4. Secondment Global Ecovillage Network Finland	GEN Finland	2017	1
5. Secondment University of Aveiro	UAVR	2018	1

Name of the learning activity	Department/ Institute	Year	Credits (ECTS) (1 cr. = 28 hrs)
B2. Placing research in a societal context (research in context) – min 1 activity, max 4 ECTS			
1. PS2- Valorization of Research	SUSPLACE	2017	1
2. Dissemination core group	SUSPLACE	2017-2019	1
C) Career related competences (personal development and your own future)			
C1. Employing transferable skills in different domains/careers (transferable skill training)–min 1 activity			
1. PS3 – Personal Leadership	SUSPLACE	2018	1,5
2. Transformation Action Hub /Arts-Based Toolkit	SUSPLACE	2017	3
Total			35.5

Annexes

Appendix 1: Coding scheme

Category (dimension)	Code	Subcode
Connection	Connecting to body–body awareness	Sexuality
	Connecting to culture and beauty	
	Connecting to simplicity–basic nature of life	
	Connection to history and ancestors	
	Embedded in locality	
	Encounter with other cultures–travelling	
	Feeling 'in place'–connecting to community	
	Feeling 'out of place'	
	Meaningful historical/political event/context	
	Re-connecting to home (country, family, culture, village, nature, lifestyle)	
	sense of place–experiencing place	
	Connection to nature	Connection to nonhuman beings
		Feeling embedded in natural systems/cycles
		re-connection to production of food and traditional products
	Learning to live in community	Raising children in community
		relations with visitors & other people and places outside the community
Creativity	Arts based creativity	
	Self-actualization	Getting out of familiar & routine–re-inventing yourself
		Young and searching for purpose in life
		non-conventional–non confirmative life choices/ adventurous life
	Change versus stability	Change–difficult moments–confronted with yourself–self development
		Inconsistency and messiness when living 'sustainably'
		Tension between dreams and reality
		ecovillage as catalyser of change
		perseverance
		Routinizing 'ecological' habits
		day to day reality in community–practicalities–'realizing utopia'
		connecting actions to a higher purpose (either community or spiritual, political etc)

Compassion	self-compassion	
	Care and healing	
	holding multiple views -paradoxical/dialectical thought–understanding value of diversity	
	In contact with feelings and inner world	Intuition
		Rediscovering the feminine
	geographies' of responsibility	
	(re) connecting to other humans	the importance of social and inner work in community
		balancing individuality & communality
	Joy–positivity–happiness– celebrating life	
Other (would later become 'transgression')	Learning through dissonance	continuous learning by interacting with new people and ideas (mild confrontation)
		Conflict in community
		Leadership & Power
	Factual knowledge/ education	
	Intergenerational	
	Rebellious nature (as child)	
	uncomfortable with modern consciousness/ society	Confronted with consequences of modernity
		confronted with oppression
		Role models–positive examples/inspiration for different life

Appendix 2: Interview guides

Life-story interviews

Childhood, family, school

Where were you born?

In what kind of family and environment? What kind of people where your parents?

What kind of child where you?

What kind of childhood did you have? / How do you remember your childhood

Was …. A big influence in your youth?

How was school for you?

Where did you go after primary and secondary school?

How was (highschool, university, ..) for you?

What did you like to do in your free time

How was that period for you?

The interview then continued following the life course of the interviewee, which was different for everyone. As interview, when needed I kept asking what happened after this period and posed probing questions to zoom in on experiences or situations that felt significant when the interviewee told them.

Probing questions zooming in on significant experiences
How did this experience influence you/changed you?
This consciousness about the political situations you lived in, when and how did this develop in you?
Do you know why?
What do you love about …(this activity, place, book, person)
How would you say spirituality or religion plays a role in your life? Is it important to you? Why/why not?
How did you experience this day?
When did you decide to move and why?
You told me …. What exactly struck you?
What would you say you carried with you from your …. Culture?
What did you like about ….?
Can you explain what it was you did not like?
Did you feel lonely?
Did you share these (thoughts, ideas, questions) with …..?
What caught your interest?
What did you find interesting?
Do you feel this experience has changed you? Why/how?
Did you find that difficult? Why? How did you deal with it?
What do you find particularly interesting?
Do you feel at home? Why?
What did you decide to do then?
How did it feel?
Do you know why you did this/choose this?
What did you like about this (new person, new initiative, community)
So why did you decide to start (medidation, gardening, ….) in the first place?
How did you feel (at this new place, in this situation, …)?
Do you feel this has changed?
Could you describe how you experienced this?
Did you also have difficult moments?
Could you describe that feeling in words?
Did you talk about this with someone?
What did you like about this book?
What happened with you when you read this book?
Was it a difficult decision?
Could you tell me a bit more about (a person, experience, book, place, ..)
Could you explain that a bit?
How did you deal with that?
Do you remember when this changed happened?

How did you acquire that strength inside, can you explain?

Where there also difficult moments?

When there were conflicts, how were these handled?

Did you have any romantic relationships at the time? And how was this while living in a community?

How did you learn to make decisions, solve conflicts, ….?

How do you think your mistakes can help others? What kind of mistakes?

Living in community, probing questions

Did you feel at home?

What was the thing that amazed you about this place the most?

Could you give examples of experiences you had during these first visits?

What are some of the most challenging experiences for you here and the nicests?

Do you have any idea why …. Is not really working/happening?

Where there also difficult moments?

When there were conflicts, how were these handled?

Did you have any romantic relationships at the time? And how was this while living in a community?

How did you learn to make decisions, solve conflicts, ….?

Could you give an example of a situation where this kind of problem with 'power' came up?

What do you appreciate most about your life here?

What would you like to see more of/accomplish?

What do you wish for the future?

Guiding questions photo-voice

Your favorite place

Challenging moment

Something you are proud of

Purpose of you life in the community