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An Ethos and Practice of Appreciation for Transformative Research: Appreciative Inquiry, Care Ethics, and Creative Methods

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Introduction

Over the last decade, a growing debate has emerged in the sustainability science community around the need for transformative research. The latter refers to research approaches that aim at producing impact-oriented knowledge through the co-creation of solutions with societal stakeholders, driven by researchers' commitment to partake in interventions seeking to enact and support change (Fazey et al., 2018). On the one side researchers are interested in investigating how transformational change happens, what are its main drivers and barriers, and how it can lead to a radical reshaping of human and environmental interactions in socio-ecological systems (Olsson et al., 2014). On the other, they are

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increasingly experimenting with action-oriented modes of knowledge co-production. In doing so, they contribute to revolutionizing the scientific paradigm towards transdisciplinary and participatory approaches that embrace uncertainty and exploration when dealing with the complex, multi-dimensional nature of socio-ecological problems (Abson et al., 2017; Fazey et al., 2020).

The content expounded in this chapter stems from a Ph.D. project (2016–2021) aimed at understanding transformational change, as well as contributing to transformative research. The study focused on Green Care practices in Finland, nature-based activities with a social innovation purpose, and their significance for pathways of place-based sustainability transformations. The data collection process was carried out over the span of three years, engaging three communities of Green Care practitioners by means of a participatory action research (PAR) approach. The conceptual building blocks of the research drew extensively from care-inspired understandings of sustainability (Pulcini, 2009; Tronto, 2013) and place-based and resourceful approaches to participatory co-production of knowledge (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Horlings, 2016).

In line with Fazey et al., (2018, p. 56) the study followed four preconditions believed to be crucial to practice transformative research: (1) it took into account the real world of politics, values, and ethics in societal change; (2) it included both practical and academic forms of knowledge; (3) it embraced creativity, innovation, and imagination as forms of knowledge production; (4) it was explicit about my position towards society and what kind of impact I expected my research to have.

The conceptual and practical understanding of change that underlined the transformative engagement in the study was inspired by the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The latter refers to a form of action research long used in the field of organizational change and management (Busche, 2013). AI is commonly known as a strengths-based and positive approach to change. It provides a framework for anticipatory learning that supports collective processes of envisioning the future in a company, organization, or community. It can go hand-in-hand with a resourceful-oriented approach to participatory engagement (Franklin, 2018). At the same time, AI's philosophical groundings are in tune with a relational

view of human agency and a celebration of life in all its forms, which is in line with a care-based understanding of sustainability. According to Zandee and Cooperrider (2008, p. 196), AI is grounded in an ‘ethos of appreciation’. Up to now, however, the latter has been seldom discussed in relevant literature, and little account exists that explains how these philosophical tenets play out in practice.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, I wish to bring attention to the ‘ethos of appreciation’ underlying AI, and highlight its promising contribution for reinforcing a care-based approach to transformative research and a resourceful approach to participatory practice. In doing so, I draw particularly from the contribution of Zandee and Cooperrider (2008) mentioned above. The second aim of this chapter is to showcase how an ‘ethos of appreciation’ can be embodied and applied in practice, detailing five kinds of creative and arts-based methods used in the Ph.D. study. For each of the five methods, I explain the context of use, the purpose, the design, the modes of implementation, and the outcomes achieved. I also link each method to a specific dimension of AI’s ‘ethos of appreciation’, to give a tangible account of how I interpreted it in practice.

In the discussion part of this chapter, I draw some reflections about the methodological potentials and limitations of using creative methods in this study, and the challenges and outcomes they yield when doing transformative research that aims to enable *care-full* and resourceful engagement processes. The chapter ends with concluding remarks about possible avenues for future research.

A Caring and Resourceful Approach to Transformative Research: Insights from the Literature

A growing number of sustainability researchers are looking at transformative change from a relational perspective, one that moves away from focusing on interactions between entities, and rather emphasizes continually unfolding processes and relationships (West et al., 2020). A major

source of inspiration in relational thinking is characterized by scholarship on care ethics. In a recently published joint work, we have explored the potential of care ethics as a relational ontology to contribute to sustainability transformation theory and practice. As a result, three caring dimensions emerged as particularly relevant: *ethically-informed practices*, *relational response-ability*, and *emotional awareness* (Moriggi et al., 2020). Many researchers committed to explore and support resourcefulness in sustainability-oriented community pathways, embrace these three dimensions in their work, in more or less conscious ways. We see their goal as twofold. On the one hand they investigate how bottom-up local initiatives may contribute to “multi-fold social, cultural, environmental and economic value-creation at a community scale” (Franklin, 2018, p. 271). Examples include research on community food initiatives, on alternative forms of health and social care provisioning, on sustainable natural resource management, etc. (Franklin, 2018). At the same time, they also engage in collaborative processes that can nurture the inherent (and more or less latent) potential of the community to sustain and enhance its own resourcefulness and resilience (Franklin, 2018). This is often done by resorting to PAR and co-creative approaches of knowledge co-production, similar to what has been done in the Ph.D. study presented in this chapter. The remainder of this section will elaborate on the meaning of each of the three caring dimensions mentioned above, while giving examples of its application in participatory and resourceful research practice.

As far as the first dimension is concerned, seeing research—and participatory engagement in particular—as an *ethically-informed practice* inspired by caring principles, implies three main conditions: (a) attentive engagement to context and its interdependencies; (b) willingness to experiment; (c) attention towards empowerment (Moriggi et al., 2020). From a care perspective, context matters greatly. Issues cannot be understood only through a universal, standardized lens, nor can they be judged through abstract moral norms (Held, 2006). Embeddedness plays an important role in caring. Similarly, we contend that engaging in *care-full* research practices implies fostering deep relationships with specific contexts and realities, understanding and learning from them (Warren, 2000) as opposed to imposing sterile top-down knowledge or

extracting useful data only for the sake of it. Much participatory and place-based researchers embrace embeddedness, relationality, and attention to context in their work (Brown et al., 2017; Giambartolomei et al., 2021; Horlings et al., 2020; see also Franklin, this book). Relating to context and its peculiarities also means becoming aware of its complexity and of the multifold relationships that constitute its socio-ecological system. This ideally implies the recognition of human-nature interdependence, and an openness to appreciate many forms of life, with an eco-centric rather than an anthropo-centric approach (Kimmerer, 2014). Arts-based research and transformative learning approaches offer meaningful examples of this kind of inquiry in practice (Harmin et al., 2017; Pearson et al., 2018). Notably, Harmin et al. (2017) resort to ‘epistemological stretching’ during a graduate level seminar course on environmental decision-making. They describe it as “a pedagogical orientation which focuses on expanding the ways of knowing that someone respects, understands, and/or engages with” (Harmin et al., 2017, p. 1). During the course, students were asked to combine course readings and lectures with personal experiences in nature, recorded through painting, sketching, prose poems, and photographs.

A second condition of research when seen as a caring and ethically-informed practice has to do with willingness to experiment. This is based on the idea that caring is an iterative practice, grounded on intensified involvement and knowledge (Noddings, 2013). For virtuous transformations to happen, things need to be done over and over again. Iteration does not merely (or necessarily) lead to betterment; however, it does create the space to adapt to the needs and capacities of those who are involved in the practice with an intentional and purpose-driven approach (Mol et al., 2010; Valencia-Sandoval et al., 2010). It also requires experimentation, tinkering, trial-and-error, and eventually, failure. Experimentation and iterative learning are considered essential factors in transformative research (Fazey et al., 2018; Giambartolomei et al., 2021). To carry out a Participatory Learning and Action Research (PLAR) project in Uganda, Sanginga et al. (2010) went through four iterative and complementary stages, including bottom-up experimentation and learning, sharing between communities, involvement of policy-makers and local administrations, and of district policy stakeholders.

Another example is provided by Foster (2016, p. 112) who narrates of the successes and failure of carrying out experimental collaborative arts-based research in order to promote social justice.

The third condition we identified in caring practices is tension towards empowerment. From a care perspective, empowerment goes hand-in-hand with recognizing the agency of both sides of the caring spectrum. Both sides must be given a voice, by re-framing relationships of power and by focusing on what people *can* do throughout the research process (Barnes, 2008). This resonates deeply with the call for co-creation and co-production of knowledge animating the transformative research debate in sustainability science today (Norström et al., 2020). Likewise, in PAR the desire to empower participants has motivated decades of attempts of inclusive and generative forms of engagement of communities and individuals (Evans et al., 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Notably, Masterson et al. (2018) describe practical and ethical advantages and challenges of using Photo-voice to engage local communities in Kenya and South Africa and to foster deep learning about human well-being in relation to socio-ecological systems dynamics (Masterson et al., 2018).

A care-based approach to empowerment is valuable as it also prompts us to see non-humans on the other side of the caring spectrum, recognizing their agency and dignity (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011; Spretnak, 1997). The starting point to refuse objectification and domination is to explore with curiosity the rhythm and needs of non-human beings, recognizing them as sentient and communicative (Harmin et al., 2017; Kimmerer, 2014). There are examples of this practice in place-based experiential learning, where storytelling is used to support students of field philosophy to engage with nature affectively, embracing feelings such as wonder and mystery (Goralnik & Nelson, 2017).

Moving on to the second dimension of a care-based approach to transformative research, we can talk of *relational response-ability*, understood as the ability to respond to the needs we see around us (Haraway, 2016). Earlier I highlighted the importance of relationality and embeddedness to context. Close interactions and embodied experiences create bonds, connections, and responsibilities. Most importantly, they enable the possibility to notice and understand the needs of others (Tronto,

2013). This is typical of PAR work, as researchers refuse detachment and neutrality, and take a pro-active committed stance in relation to the community involved. Heras and Tàbara (2014) review around 20 examples of community-based research that used performative methods as an integrative research approach drawing on elements from the performing arts to support individual, community, and institutional reflexivity and transformation. Many researchers also feel the need to train their capacity for attentiveness (and consequently, response-ability) by learning to be “present – in the moment – and also open to what is not yet known” (Foster, 2016, p. 129). This can be done through mindfulness (Wamsler et al., 2018), spirituality (Kaufman, 2017), reflexivity (Robertson, 2000), and a general willingness to “dig in, to develop meaning, make connections, be honest and vulnerable, and seek growth” (Goralnik & Nelson, 2017, p. 15).

Finally, the third component of a care-based approach to transformative change is *emotional awareness*. For a long time, emotions have been fenced from the research arena. Recently, the humanities and social (sustainability) sciences have started to appreciate the centrality of emotions—both ‘negative’ and ‘positive’—for change agency (Leys, 2011). Feelings such as anger, joy, fear, and hope can orient one’s self towards the future and guide transformative actions (Pearson, 2021). Emotions are also deeply connected to our value systems, and greatly influence our moral compass, and the decisions we choose to take (Held, 2006). As a result, transformative researchers are slowly experimenting with the practice of bridging emotional and rational dimensions in processes of collective co-creation (Galafassi, 2018; Pearson et al., 2018). The dramatic urgency of socio-environmental issues, exemplified by the climate crisis, cannot be purely discussed through the medium of sterile modelling forecasts. By engaging with emotions, people can foster imagination, creativity, and intuition, and project themselves into the future in hopeful and liberating ways (Pearson, 2021). To this aim, novel ways of generating knowledge are being pursued, including visioning techniques that help people to embrace uncertainty and vulnerability (Evans et al., 2010; Tschakert et al., 2014), and that tap into existing positive and inspirational initiatives to explore alternative pathways to the future (Pereira et al., 2019).

Appreciative Inquiry and an Ethos of Appreciation

Since its introduction in the 1980s, AI has been used extensively around the world to promote transformative change in organizations and groups (Ludema & Fry, 2008). The idea underlying AI is not to implement change towards a goal. Rather, it is “about *changing* ... convening, conversing and relating with each another in order to tap into the natural capacity for cooperation and change that is in every system” (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 281). AI is based on the assumption that each organization or group has a positive core that provides a source of ‘renewable’ energy for both personal and organizational transformation. Often, this positive source of energy remains untapped due to a long-standing reliance on a problem-solving approach. However, accounts from research and practice have demonstrated how focusing on problems to search for solutions often leads to ineffective and disappointing results (Hung et al., 2018). In contrast, AI builds on the idea of ‘generativity’. Rather than being stuck in conversations about gaps and challenges, or getting trapped in reductionist thinking about one solution versus another, AI leverages the capacity for generative dialogue between individuals (Busche, 2011). It empowers people to build new knowledge, spur inventiveness, create energy, and enhance co-operative capacity, through curiosity, wonder, and surprise (Ludema & Fry, 2008; Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). This triggers a virtuous circle, where inspiration, joy, and strength feed into each other towards “ascending spirals of co-operative action” (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 282).

The tendency to focus on the positive characterizing AI has also been viewed with criticism. Practitioners who favour exclusively positive narratives at the expense of negative experiences and feelings, may reduce AI to a simplistic, mechanical, and even manipulative form of engagement (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). Moreover, many using AI mostly rely on its 4-D cycle of inquiry (*discovery—dream—design—destiny*), without truly understanding the origins of the practice and the philosophical principles inspiring it (Ludema & Fry, 2008). To countervail risks of trivialization of AI, Zandee and Cooperrider (2008) elaborate on five dimensions that lie at the heart of its ‘ethos of appreciation’. These

dimensions are not only meaningful as they support AI practitioners in substantiating and elevating the generative capacity of their work. They are also valuable lenses that illuminate over the similarities and complementarity between AI, a care-based approach to transformative change, and participatory and resourceful approaches to engagement. As such, they were particularly valuable in the Ph.D. study object of this chapter. I will now briefly explore each of the five dimensions (also shown in Fig. 5.1).

Illuminating the miracle of life is the first dimension proposed by Zandee and Cooperrider. It is based on the assumption that life is mysterious, and as such must be appreciated with wonder and “childlike openness in inquiry” (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 193). Accepting mystery also implies embracing uncertainty—for a long time banished from the scientific realm, and now increasingly called for by transformative research proponents (Keeler et al., 2017; West et al., 2020). As far as

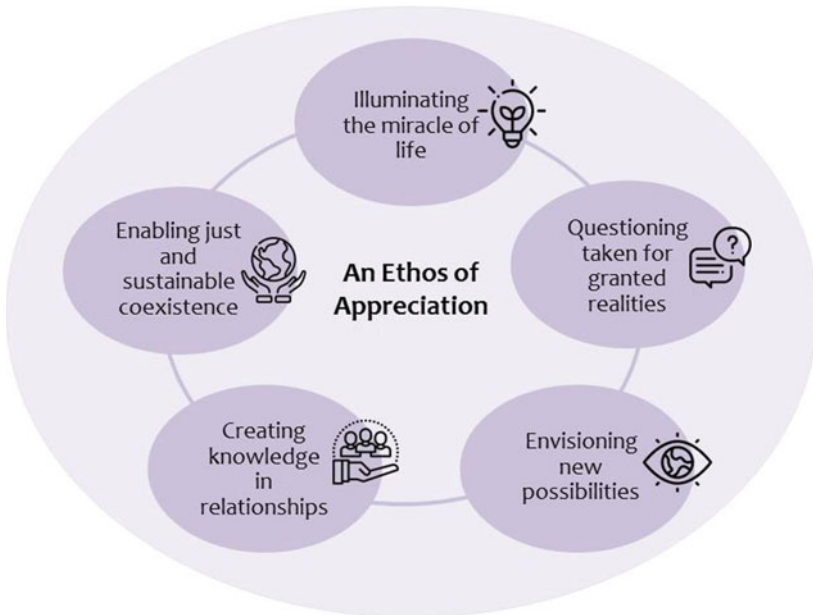


Fig. 5.1 Five dimensions of an ethos of appreciation in AI (Source Developed following Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008)

wonder is concerned, from a care perspective, it is absolutely crucial. It is a way to appreciate the Earth's beauty, as well as its suffering; to see, feel, and sense empathetically *with* it (Kimmerer, 2014). Nurturing a sense of wonder is not merely an aesthetic exercise, but also a moral virtue, as Kathleen Dean Moore beautifully explains, drawing from Rachel Carson and her masterpiece *The Edge of the Sea* (2007). As Carson wrote: "I believe that the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we will have for destruction" (Moore, 2005, p. 28).

The second dimension characterizing an ethos of appreciation is *questioning taken for granted realities*. AI invites us to rethink the questions we ask, and reframe the topics of inquiry. The goal is to break free of habituated patterns of thinking and acting, and unleash curiosity, imagination, and fresh thinking and deliberation (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). Care ethics scholars have long questioned taken for granted ontologies, engrained in Western philosophical thinking. The idea of relational response-ability is one of many examples. As explained in the previous section of this chapter, it allows us to shift the focus on responsibility as a burden towards a response-ability as a forward-looking act, triggered by our capacity of being in relation, and noticing the needs of other humans and non-humans.

Envisioning new possibilities is the third dimension that underlies an ethos of appreciation in AI. It is the practice of welcoming infinite possibilities when imagining our social worlds (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). It stems from a deep inquiry into the core values at the heart of our system and that provide the inspiration to envision evocative images of the future. We have seen above how a care-based approach to change puts at the centre the capacity for imagination, grounded in affective and moral sentiments, needed to crystallize alternative visions of the future.

Fourth, AI is about *creating knowledge in relationship*. The assumption here—once again in line with a care ethics philosophy—is that human existence is fundamentally relational. Instead of focusing on individualistic accounts of human agency, we should focus on relationships and "see others as vital co-creators of our mind, our self, and our society" (Sampson in Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 195). The process of

inquiry is supposed to nurture this relational knowledge by creating the conditions for interpersonal connection and sharing.

Finally, the fifth dimension is about *enabling just and sustainable coexistence*. Relationships are not to be nurtured solely with other human beings, but should embrace other species as well. Engaging in AI processes should therefore also remind us of “our own embodied participation in a spirited, biological realm” and “appreciate our sensuous participation in a more-than-human world” (Abram, 1996 in Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 195). This eco-centric approach resonates well with awareness of interdependence animating a care-based approach to transformative change.

In the remainder of this chapter, my goal is to showcase how an ethos of appreciation can be put into practice, by detailing five kinds of creative methods I have employed during the collaborative engagement part of my Ph.D. project. For each method, I will explain the purpose, the sources of inspiration, the way it was implemented, and the outcomes it produced. To each method is associated one of the five dimensions of an ethos of appreciation presented above. By elaborating on the practical applicability of each dimension in detail, my goal is to complement and enrich the conceptual assumptions sketched by Zandee and Cooperrider (2008), offering additional interpretations of *how* an ethos of appreciation can be understood and operationalized.

An Ethos of Appreciation in Practice: An Account from the Field Using Creative Methods

This section provides a methodological and empirical account of the application of selected methods during the course of my Ph.D. study. Before introducing each method in detail, I provide some background information about the research and a brief overview of the various stages of participatory engagement.

Empirical Study: A Three-Year Collaboration with Green Care Practitioners in Finland

The overall aim of my Ph.D. project was to analyze and appreciate place-based practices of Green Care in Finland and their possible significance and contribution to processes of transformative change (Moriggi, 2021). Green Care is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of activities in nature aimed at health and social care, social inclusion, pedagogy, and recreation (Sempik et al., 2010). In this study I explored three diverse examples of Green Care practices. The first case, a care farm, involves a group of mentally disabled people in sheep husbandry and farming activities for therapeutic purposes. The second case, a biodynamic farm, engages different target groups (e.g., long-term unemployed, children with special needs) in farming practices for social inclusion and pedagogy. The third case, a nature-tourism company, offers outdoor sports, wellbeing, educational, and recreational activities to a variety of users, including company employees, people with disabilities, and the elderly.

The main practitioners of the two farms and of the company (seven people) were engaged over the span of three years on a continuous basis (2016–2019). Most stages of fieldwork also involved other stakeholders, such as the staff of the three enterprises, their clients, the external networks of collaborators (e.g., civil servants, business partners, buyers, etc.), as well as experts in the field of Green Care. Around 75 people were involved in total. The collaboration aimed at not only gathering relevant data, but also at fostering a process of critical reflection and capacity-building for the three communities of practitioners, appreciating their assets and capacities, in line with a resourceful approach to participatory practice. The study focused on people's values and motivations to initiate Green Care activities, on the caring relationships enacted through the practices (see Moriggi et al., 2020), and on the role of place-based resources in sustaining the process of change agency at both individual and collective levels (Moriggi, 2019).

The empirical work relied on an in-depth qualitative research informed by place-based, transdisciplinary sustainability science, enriched by the principles and techniques of Participatory Action Research (PAR). In line with these traditions, all methods were

designed and implemented following principles of inclusiveness, transparency, reflexivity, and empathy. The methods of data collection in the study stem from an ‘eclectic pluralism’ of approaches and techniques, borrowing from both academic and non-academic fields (Chambers, 2008, p. 311). As often happens in action research, my methodological approach was that of a ‘bricoleur’, as I integrated and made sense of various perspectives with the evolving of the research process, and of my understanding of the issues under study (Wicks et al., 2008, p. 26). As a result, more conventional data collection activities, such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation, were coupled with visual and creative ones, such as Photo-voice and arts-based methods.

Figure 5.2 provides an overview of the various stages of fieldwork and the methods used.

The methods detailed in the following section are creative techniques that were specifically designed and used during the co-creation workshops. The first workshop, called ‘Sharing and Reflecting’, was carried out in August 2018, and brought together the practitioners of the three cases (nine people)—including the main entrepreneurs and some of their staff. The objectives were twofold: (a) to present and discuss preliminary results and the conceptual framework of the research work; (b) to provide an opportunity for sharing and reflection, highlighting both commonalities and differences of the various approaches to Green Care

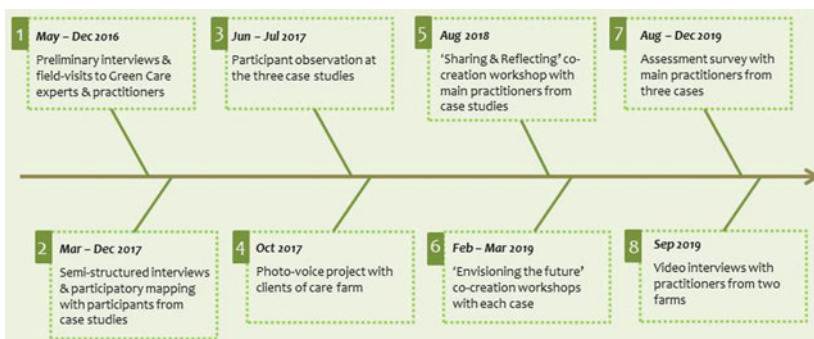


Fig. 5.2 Stages of fieldwork and related methods of data collection (Source The author)

across the three cases. The workshop lasted seven hours and was structured loosely following the tenets of Theory U, a facilitation framework particularly used in organizational management and change (Scharmer, 2007). Different techniques were used, some borrowed from organizational management, others inspired by system thinking, others adapted from arts-based research and experiential learning.

The second series of workshops, called ‘Envisioning the future’, involved each of the three cases separately, to support practitioners in crystallizing future visions of their Green Care practices, and the wider development of their community and place. In total, sixteen people participated in the three workshops. Also in this case, the workshop lasted seven hours, and was designed combining Theory U with the 4-D model of Appreciative Inquiry (*discovery—dream—design—destiny*). The methods used borrowed from system thinking, design thinking, and arts-based research.

I acted as a facilitator in both workshops and had the support of a Masters’ student (Finnish mother-tongue), who provided logistical help and interpretation assistance when needed.

Below I introduce five methods used during the two workshops, following the chronological order with which they were implemented.

Method No. 1—‘Circle of Objects’: Creating Knowledge in Relationships

The ‘Circle of objects’ was used as an opening ice-breaker during the ‘Sharing and Reflecting’ workshop. Two weeks prior to the workshop, participants were invited to think of an object that best represented their involvement in Green Care. The goal was to have each person introduce themselves to the group in a non-conventional way, “creating an atmosphere of unity in diversity” (Pearson et al., 2018, p. 18). The object was meant to be a symbolic token of something people cared about or valued deeply in their work, expressing their personal relationship to Green Care and learning from others in an emotionally-sensed way. “Objects have a great evocative and aesthetic power” and “enable people to communicate tactically and metaphorically” (Pearson et al., 2018, p. 18). The method



Fig. 5.3 'Circle of objects': people sharing in circle; all the objects collected on a chair (Source The author)

was adapted from a version previously designed by the author of this chapter jointly with other colleagues (from the collective *Re.imaginary*¹) for a workshop not related to this Ph.D. study (see Pearson et al., 2018).

After a few welcoming words at the start of the workshop, participants were invited to join in a circle, holding the objects in their hands. One after the other, people introduced themselves, briefly narrating the story behind their object, and placed it at the centre of the circle, as a symbolic gesture signalling their belonging to the community of people participating to the workshop. As shown in Fig. 5.3, some of the objects were pieces of equipment used daily by people in their work, such as a shovel—reminding them of the importance of caring for the soil, crucial source of life for all practices happening on the farm. Others brought a nail clipper for rabbits and a sheep cane, telling of daily practices of caring for animals, needed 'partners' in the rehabilitation and social inclusion activities. Other objects related to the different aspects or roles taken in Green Care practices. Notably, one participant brought an enamel cup with an image of the Moomins, fantastic characters designed by Tove Jansson (Finnish writer of children's literature), widely popular and appreciated across the country. The object symbolized her role as a storyteller when working as a nature guide, taking groups into the forest and narrating of traditional livelihoods and human-nature relationships. Another person brought a broom with a puppet of a Nature Witch, to introduce her 'alias' during Green Care activities. She expressed her wish to convey wonder and magic to people, via experiential learning in

¹ See: <https://www.reimaginary.com/>.

nature. A woman brought a pair of hand mittens, to signify the combination of softness and strength required of a professional Green Care practitioner. Cloves flowers reminded a person of the regenerating power of forest walks, that she herself experienced living on the biodynamic farm.

The objects were rich in meaning and acted as a medium to people's personal stories and experiences. In line with AI's principle of *creating knowledge in relationships*, they allowed participants to connect as a group and share their sources of inspiration and accomplishment (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). These 'narrative rich' short introductions brought smiles to people's faces, and created a sense of kindness and mutual empathy that set the tone for the remainder of the workshop.

Method No. 2—'Creating with the Soil': Enabling Just and Sustainable Coexistence

The second method, called 'Creating with the soil', was used about two-thirds of the way through the 'Sharing & Reflecting' workshop. The core part of the workshop combined my presentations of the main findings of the Ph.D. study (up to that point in time), with discussions in pairs, and sharing in plenary. It then involved an individual mapping exercise focused on Green Care practitioners' resourcefulness, also followed by collective sharing. All these activities required substantial intellectual effort from participants, with a great deal of information being conveyed and thoughts expressed. As such, I deemed it necessary to include a somatic break in the workshop, to allow people to reconnect with their bodies, and rest their brains for a while (Evans et al., 2009).

Participants were therefore invited to 'create with the soil'. A week before the workshop, I asked the practitioners from the biodynamic farm (located only 5 km away from the workshop's venue) to collect a bucket of fresh soil from their farm, and bring it along on the workshop day, together with a thick wood branch. The 'Creating with the soil' method is about working with clayish material in a freestyle, letting shapes emerge and crystallize without previous planning. The goal is to enable a playful and relaxed atmosphere, away from complex and

articulated discussions, engaging with a simple, almost child-like, artful expression. The method also aims at facilitating generativity and intuition, by allowing people to ‘think with their hands’. As such, it disrupts normal patterns of thought, and can lead to unexpected wisdom and insights during the process of creation. The method is also an inclusive one, as it does not require the communication of articulated thoughts verbally, nor to be ‘proficient’ in any creative forms of expression, as people can make shapes freely and at their own pace, without any expectations of the outcome.

‘Creating with the soil’ was inspired by artist Lotte Kravitz, who facilitated a similar exercise during the international conference ‘Transformations to Sustainability’, held at the University of Dundee in September 2017. When designing the co-creation workshop for my research, I found this method particularly fit, knowing the participants involved, and their natural attitude to ‘get their hands dirty’. Moreover, the act of shaping the soil has strong symbolic connotation. The soil of the biodynamic farm is far from being mere dirt; rather, it is composed of lively organic matter, rich in dead and living organisms. For the practitioners there, it is a crucial source of life on the farm, something to attentively care for, and the subject of various sacred rituals. Although the other participants did not follow anthroposophical principles, all expressed great respect for the soil and the natural elements they engage with daily. As such, I felt that ‘creating with the soil’ could well express AI’s proposition to be reminded of “our own embodied participation in a spirited, biological realm & appreciate our sensuous participation in a more-than-human world” (Abram in Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 195). This is linked to the fifth dimension of an ethos of appreciation expounded earlier, namely *enabling just and sustainable coexistence*. The idea underlying it is to nurture relationships with both humans and non-humans, avoiding an anthropocentric approach, and bringing to the room and the co-creation process other living elements. According to Zandee and Cooperrider (2008), one good way to do so is by engaging in bodily exercises, sensing and feeling one’s own rootedness in the larger ecology. This may also enable reflections and insights that allow people to reconnect to the values and sources of motivation that inspire their everyday undertakings.

During the 'Sharing and Reflecting' workshop, I placed the wood branch on a table in the middle of the room, together with the bucket of soil and a bowl of water. As shown in Fig. 5.4, people were invited to join on a voluntary basis, and start working with their hands. When and if a shape formed, they could place it on the wood branch for display. Participants responded enthusiastically, and a few of them immediately joined the table. As they started to play with the soil, they engaged in relaxed conversations, laughing and smiling. However, it was not easy to get everyone to join at the same time; this made the process not as fluid and lively as I had experienced it as a participant in Dundee. Finnish people are very respectful of other people's space, and therefore some of the participants preferred to 'take turns' rather than mingle with the whole group. In the end, everyone ended up with a little creation, and placed it on the wood branch.

The shapes were mostly related to beings from the natural world, including a mushroom, a rabbit, a pig, a bug, and a horseshoe. Other shapes included some alien forms, and a small human with open arms. The meaning of the creations was not discussed, but simply shared in plenary to foster a feeling of collectiveness and unity in diversity, and anchor key impressions from the exercise.

Reflecting back on the effectiveness of the method, I can say that it worked as a relaxing and aesthetically pleasant break. However, it required more time than planned (including the time needed for people to wash their hands and reconvene in the room), and I therefore had to



Fig. 5.4 'Creating with the soil': people shaping the clay; the forms created displayed on the wood branch (*Source* The author)

rush it towards the end. Moreover, the exercise that was scheduled afterwards did not build on the feeling of more-than-human co-existence, nor did it engage further with the somatic intelligence of the participants. As such, the potential to fully put into practice an ethos of appreciation was partially lost on this occasion.

Method No.3—‘Council of Beings’: Questioning Taken for Granted Realities

The third method, called the ‘Council of beings’, was used during the ‘Envisioning the future’ workshops, in close combination with method No. 4—‘Letters from the future’—which I will present next. Three separate ‘Envisioning the Future’ workshops were held for this study, and I will therefore reflect on Methods Nos. 3 and 4 thinking of all the three events.

The ‘Council of beings’ is a combined adaptation of two techniques (respectively called ‘Inviting non-human stakeholders’ and ‘Expanding time’) previously designed by a group of colleagues and myself for a workshop not related to this Ph.D. project (see Pearson et al., 2018). It is directly inspired from Joanna Macy’s ‘Council of all beings’ (Macy & Brown, 1998). The latter is a communal ritual in which participants are asked to step aside from their human identity and speak on behalf of another life-form, in order to gain stronger awareness of our interdependence with other living beings, and trigger emotions of care and wonder for them. In this sense, the exercise lends itself to *questioning taken for granted realities*, one of the five dimensions of AI’s ethos of appreciation. Instead of approaching an issue exclusively from an anthropocentric perspective, as it is normally done, this method forces people to reframe the questions to be asked, and break free of habituated ways of thinking, to take on non-human perspectives.

The ‘Council of beings’ (together with ‘Letters from the future’) formed the ‘Dream’ part of my workshops, which were structured along AI’s 4-D cycle of inquiry. During that phase, participants were asked to give voice to desires and wishes for the future, when thinking of the development of their place and practices. As a first step, I invited them

to embrace a different perception of time by showing them a timeline, portraying the time span of different human and non-human beings. The beings on each timeline were closely related to each case. In the one shown in Fig. 5.5—designed for the care farm—I included the picture of a building, namely the guided-living unit where the mentally disabled clients live, imagining it would be there for about 200 years. Human beings included a child, a disabled person, and an elderly lady (living on average 85 years)—representing the current and possible future dwellers of the farm (all the pictures were taken from the internet and did not represent any real person living on the farm, for confidentiality reasons). The remaining pictures portrayed the miniature pigs living on the farm (living 12 years on average), one of the many sheep they raise (living 10 years on average), and a butterfly (living 1 month on average). By showing the different time span of the various beings, the aim was to make people reflect about our usual perception of time, often mostly focused on our short-term needs as humans, and highlight other time perceptions as well. When thinking about the future development of a place, it is important to become aware of the needs of different beings, including elements of the socio-ecological system (Pearson et al., 2018).

As a second step, I laid out seven cards on a table (one more than the number of participants present), each representing one of the beings on the timeline. I asked people to observe the cards, and pick one they would want to give voice to, in this exercise and in the following one



Fig. 5.5 'Council of beings': timeline of change; cards with different beings (Source The author)

of imagining the future. Once everyone had a card, people introduced their ‘new self’, and named a characteristic or something they loved about their character. This moment of sharing was meant to symbolically invite the new stakeholders’ identities to the discussion, and trigger people’s imagination and capacity to step out of their comfort zone. Both steps worked well in all the workshops I held. People could immediately relate to the beings introduced, as they were part of their everyday life and work. They also quickly ‘embraced’ their new self, and got into the playful atmosphere of pretending to be a different being. Knowing the participants in advance certainly helped me to select the most appropriate choice of human and non-human beings, in a way that would speak to each participant’s experiences and aspirations.

Method No. 4—‘Letters from the Future’: Illuminating the Miracle of Life

The method ‘Letters from the future’ followed straight after the ‘Council of beings’. Once people went back to their seats, I distributed a nice piece of paper, resembling the texture of a letter, and a pen. People were then invited to write a short letter to themselves, thinking from the perspective of their ‘new’ being. This person or animal or thing would speak to them from the future, in the year 2039, 20 years from the date of the workshop. Their future selves had the capacity to see their place—the care farm, the biodynamic farm, or the location of the nature-tourism company—in its future and most ideal development state. The following guiding questions were given as prompts: (1) *What do you see in the place? What does it look like?* (2) *What activities are happening? Who is there?* (3) *How do you feel? What sparks your joy?* People were then given ca. 20 minutes to write their letters, choosing either English or their mother tongue (Finnish or Swedish), as the preferred language of writing (see Fig. 5.6). Once everyone had finished their letters, participants were asked to read them out loud, sharing their visions with the group. Language interpretation was provided by my assistant, in case the letter was not in English, to allow me to understand the content fully.



Fig. 5.6 'Letters from the future': participants writing letters from the perspective of other beings (Source The author)

The main goal of this method was to elicit a dream-like situation in which people could picture the best possible scenario for their place. In AI, it is important to go through this stage, rather than moving straight from the present situation to a future one. The *Dream* phase allows people to connect to their deepest sources of motivation and to give voice to their wishes, without being held back by cynicism or caution. It answers the question *What could be?* and prompts people to envision multiple possibilities. It is followed by the *Design* phase, when space is given to building the necessary steps to realize the ideal vision, answering the question *What should be?* (Busche, 2011). Zandee and Cooperrider suggest using artful creations, such as drawing, poems, and songs, in the *Dream* phase, to “express latent images of ideal futures” and discover and communicate shared meaning (2008, p. 194). According to them, this is conducive to *illuminate the miracle of life*. Artful creations introduce a sense of wonder and childlike inquiry to the discussion, allowing people to access a more ‘intuitive’ and ‘sensuous’ understanding of organizational life (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008).

In the case of the workshops I held, my hope was to heighten the sense of wonder, by taking the perspective of a different being. In that way, participants were asked to disrupt their normal patterns of thinking, and crystallize thoughts previously untapped. For instance, when thinking as a butterfly, participants imagined flying over their place, and got a landscape view of what was happening and how, noticing smells or seeing things that usually went unnoticed. Additionally, people were asked to picture an ideal and positive future in the mind of an animal or a

plant. As such, more chances were created to portray regenerative possibilities—conducive for both human’s and non-human’s flourishing and well-being—and therefore not only illuminate, but also celebrate and nurture the miracle of life.

It is important to note that not all workshops led to the same outcomes. In one of them, I encountered resistance by one of the participants—who held an important role in the organization—who refused to embrace a positive perspective on the future. Rather, they chose to depict a dystopian future, portraying ecological destruction and loss of the human-nature connection. This partially jeopardized the process, as it created a sense of awkwardness and mismatch with the visions presented by the other participants. It also toned down the collective energy in the group, and somehow trivialized the imaginative and dream-like efforts in the other letters. In response to this, I slightly adapted the remaining part of the workshops, trying also to give voice to risks and challenges when building realistic steps towards the future vision. However, looking back at the workshop now, I can say that a more flexible structure and stronger experience as a facilitator from my side could have helped to welcome the resistance in a more fruitful way, and re-shape the workshop most appropriately.

As far as the other workshops were concerned, the ‘Letters from the future’ method yielded very positive results. There was a collective sense of empathy and heartfelt connection while people read their letters. People later said that hearing others depict positive visions of their places, made them feel hopeful and energized to further pursue their plans and wishes. This exercise also gave them confidence for the next part of the workshop, in which concrete activities and needed resources had to be envisioned.

Method No. 5—‘Vision Tree’: Envisioning New Possibilities

The last method I would like to introduce is called ‘Vision tree’ and takes direct inspiration from a manual that tells of experiences of using AI with rural Indian communities (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). The tree is a visual

metaphor that helps to brainstorm, crystallize, and prioritize thoughts in the group. In the case of my workshops, I used it in conjunction with ‘Letters from the future’, explained in the previous section. While participants were reading their letters out loud, I recorded as many keywords as possible on post-its, responding to the guiding questions given earlier: (1) *What do you see in the place? What does it look like?* (2) *What activities are happening? Who is there?* (3) *How do you feel? What sparks your joy?* I then clustered the keywords into three main areas: *core elements*, representing the roots of the tree; *main activities*, to be placed on the trunk of the tree; and *values & emotions*, manifested on the fruit or branches of the tree.

Once all participants had finished their letters, as can be seen in Fig. 5.7, I placed the various post-its on the Vision tree—painted by myself prior to the workshop on thick paper, hanging on one of the walls of the workshop’s venue. In the case of the care farm, words like horses, visitors, butterflies, wool, water streams, new buildings, etc., appeared at the roots of the tree. On the trunk, there were yoga courses, musical gigs, farmers’ markets, horse care, etc. The branches were populated by feelings of joy, beauty, love, community, trust, etc.

My main goal with this adaptation of the exercise was to acknowledge participants’ visions in a way that would be immediately visible to



Fig. 5.7 ‘Vision Tree’: the tree with and without post-its (Source The author)

everyone in the group. By seeing all the keywords in one image, people could easily spot similarities or resonances, but also differences. Moreover, having keywords clustered on the different parts of the tree, allowed for analytical clarity, leading naturally to the next stage in the workshop, in which concrete plans and steps had to be taken into account—focusing on future practices, ways of working, and needed resources. The goal was also in line with AI's ethos of appreciation, and in particular with the idea of *envisioning new possibilities*. This process had already started with the 'Letters from the future', and was now further consolidated as people could actually *see* black on white the most important ingredients that made new possibilities alive. As Zandee and Cooper-rider put it, 'words create worlds' (2008, p. 194). It is important to co-create the positive imagery collectively and to highlight the connections between ingredients and inspiration, so that the image of the future feels like a shared one.

Discussion

In this section I draw some methodological reflections, focusing on design and execution of the techniques detailed above, and reflecting on their added value for transformative research aimed at enabling *care-full* and resourceful processes of engagement. I also briefly elaborate on the kind of research data and more general outcomes the methods yielded, highlighting challenges and limitations. These reflections draw from my own observations and the notes in my research diary, as well as the feedback given by the participants about the methods—right after the workshop, as well as via a questionnaire survey administered to the main practitioners (seven people) at the end of the research project (Moriggi, 2021).

As far as design is concerned, a lot of preparation and thorough planning was dedicated to the methods. I followed an informed rationale, and aimed at achieving specific objectives. Only at a later stage, once the methods had been tested multiple times, did I gain stronger awareness of its strengths and challenges. Notably, only when trying out the methods with different audiences did I realize how they could allow me

to put specific AI principles into practice and facilitate transformative processes.

In terms of execution, I believe creative techniques substantially enriched the processes of co-creation during the workshops. They also enhanced the care-*full* and resourceful approach I was trying to embody. Notably, they facilitated greater empathy and connection within the group (and with non-human beings), spurred people's imagination and out-of-the-box thinking, they helped participants to access their inner wisdom and emotions, they disrupted habituated patterns of thought and action, and allowed for experimentation and tinkering. The visual artefacts acted as useful 'boundary objects'—prompts that facilitated communication and understanding around a certain issue (Home & Rump, 2015). These outcomes are in line with what is expected of action-oriented and transdisciplinary forms of research. A crucial pre-condition to their effectiveness was that most participants could *trust the process*, accepting to play and participate, without knowing the outcome. On the other hand, even when some of the techniques were not used to their full potential, or when I encountered the resistance of some of the participants, I could see the long-term benefits of using these methods for the engagement process in its entirety. A certain degree of flexibility was important to adapt the methods to different circumstances. On the other hand, the structure of the workshops was rather tight, and extra space could have been made for improvisation and serendipity. Flexibility and adaptation are crucial for care-*full* and resourceful research: they allow the facilitator/researcher to tap into the full (and perhaps unexplored) potential of the method, while helping the group to feel empowered and thrive along the process.

For the purpose of my Ph.D. study, during the workshops I used creative methods in combination with more 'analytical' ones (e.g., SWOT analysis, system mapping). These methods were particularly appropriate to gather text-rich information, and allowed participants to rely on more conventional and familiar forms of learning and collaborating. By combining different techniques, I was able to elicit different modalities of knowledge generation—engaging brains, hearts, and hands—and facilitate both individual and collective learning.

In terms of outcomes, looking back at the whole research process, I did not merely rely on co-creative workshops and creative methods, but also on more conventional forms of data collection, such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation. These provided in-depth information that cannot always be accessed through group events lasting only a few hours. Interviews transcripts have been a crucial in-depth source of empirical findings for my Ph.D. papers and thesis. I also analyzed some of the data obtained through creative methods. To this aim, it was very important to document the process during the workshops, by taking pictures, recording people's observations and thoughts (either with the help of a note-keeper, or with a tape recorder), and transcribing the information written on post-its, maps, letters, etc. The data obtained were mostly used for triangulation purposes, namely to achieve greater rigour when interpreting different datasets and enhancing the validity of the formulated findings. To some extent, the process of triangulation mitigated risks of 'deference' and 'social desirability' effects, namely when participants tell the researcher what they want to hear, or what makes them look good in front of the group (Galafassi, 2018). Moreover, presenting preliminary findings and conceptualizations to participants was extremely valuable to validate their accuracy and relevance. Documenting the process during the workshops was also valuable as it provided so-called 'presentational knowledge', useful for communication purposes beyond fieldwork (Gearty et al., 2015, p. 61). In the weeks following each workshop, I compiled a 'Learning Portfolio', a short document where I collected pictures, slides, and thoughts discussed during the workshop. The Portfolios were then sent in both hardcopy and electronic format to the participants, as a record of what had happened during the workshops, and as a resource they could tap into for their future development steps. Moreover, I also used the pictures in presentations and events to communicate findings in a more effective and memorable way.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed the need to foster transformative research, and presented Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a framework for organizational change and management. AI provides both conceptual and practical tools that can enrich care-*full* and resourceful transformative research practice. In particular, I presented five dimensions of AI's 'ethos of appreciation', laying out their philosophical meaning, as well as their practical application, by giving a detailed account of five creative methods I employed during my Ph.D. study.

In conclusion, it can be said that the methods proved very valuable to facilitate care-*full* and resourceful processes of co-creation. They also revealed, especially over time and with multiple applications, how an 'ethos of appreciation' can be put into practice. However, challenges and limitations were also present. Additional empirical testing of these methods is needed, to explore their possible application and potential in various contexts of action, and in combination with different techniques. Moreover, the five dimensions of an ethos of appreciation deserve further attention and elaboration, at both conceptual and methodological levels. AI offers meaningful perspectives that have so far been only partially taken on by proponents of transformative sustainability research. The hope is that this chapter can provide inspiration for other researchers and practitioners to embrace an 'ethos of appreciation', and to foster care-*full* and resourceful engagement processes for transformative change.

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