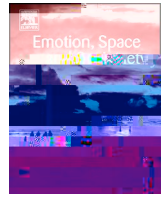




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### Place based transformative learning: a framework to explore consciousness in sustainability initiatives

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#### ABSTRACT

Based on a critical literature review, the article argues that transformative learning (TL) that fosters a shift in consciousness towards a more ecological approach is an inherently place-based phenomenon. In this article we build a place-based approach to TL based on a literature review. Our theoretical framework is grounded in three key themes which emerge from the literature: (re-) connection, (self-)compassion and creativity. (Re-)connection involves all processes that evoke an experience of the interconnected nature of all life. (Self-)compassion, acting in nature

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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 relationships, 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 article 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 article thus aims to enrich the sustainability sciences first of all by contributing to a vision of sustainability that recognises the inter-related 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





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.

### 3.3. 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 biophysical 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-ecolo-

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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 (4.b).

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 'en-acting' 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 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 Je rey, 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 requires considering and addressing place specificities, including issues of power, traditional taboos/sanctions/ceremonies related to natural resources 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.

#### 4. 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

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