

Exploring human-nature relations: a participatory action-research using PhotoVoice

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Agriculture & Forestry (TESAF)

10 November 2025

Guest lecture

Sociology, Places, and Cultures of Sustainability

MA Course: Clinical, Social and Intercultural
Psychology – University of Padova (UniPD)



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Flow of the lecture

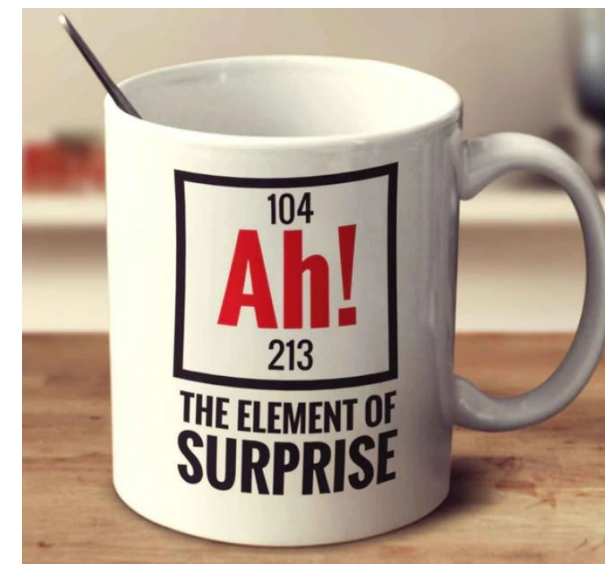
- ✓ Round of introductions
- ✓ Participatory & co-creative research for sustainability
- ✓ The project VERVE and the Photovoice Lab



PART 1 – INTRO & WARM UP

Quick round of check-in

- ✓ I am (*name*) from(*country*)
- ✓ I study (*subject, year, etc.*)
- ✓ One thing that inspires me from my Master studies is
- ✓ One thing I learnt in this course (so far) that struck me is...



About

- ✓ Social scientist working for **inter- and transdisciplinary sustainability** projects since 2013
- ✓ Co-founder of **www.reimaginary.com**, creative methods for regenerative thinking
- ✓ PhD from Wageningen Uni – **Rural Sociology** Group on **Green Care practices** in Finland – based at Luke (Natural Resources Institute Finland)
- ✓ Co-creator of children book «**Once Upon the Future: Everyday Adventures that Change the World**» (Babidibu libros, 2022)
- ✓ Co-creator of MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) on **Care-full Scholarship**



From participatory to action-research....

Semi-structured Interviews +
Participatory Mapping



Participant Observation



Arts-based
Workshops



Photo-voice + Walking
Interviews with
vulnerable groups

Experts' Focus Groups



'Visioning' Workshops
with practitioners



VERVE: new imaginaries through co-creative visioning

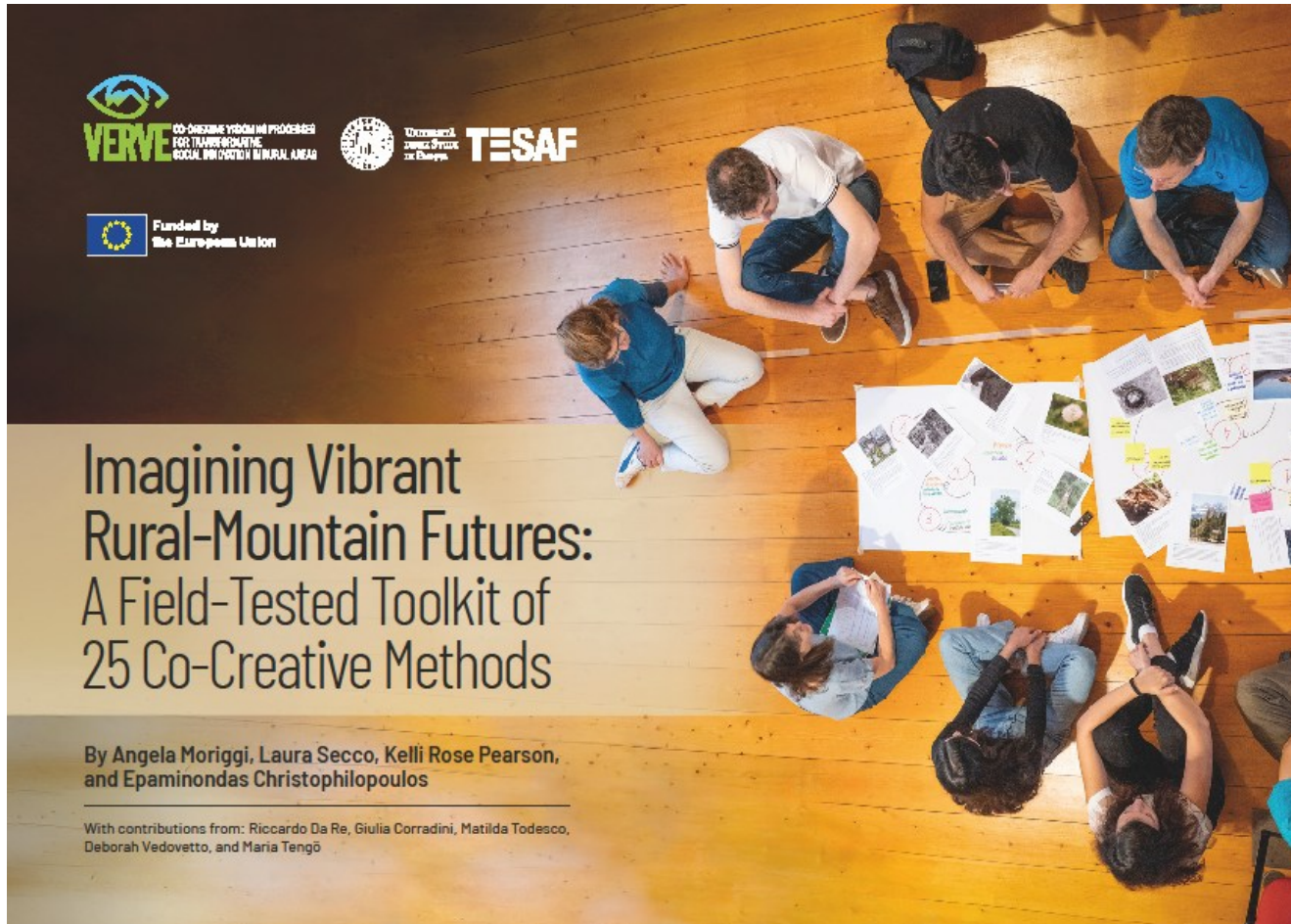
- Participatory action-research project funded by EU Commission through a Marie Curie Individual Fellowship – *Grant agreement no.101025710* (Sept. 2022 – Jan. 2025)
- Case study: Belluno Province (Italian North-Eastern Alps)
- With support of local institutions: **Foundation on Mountain Studies-** G. Angelini (project “Rigenera Montagna”), and **Local Action Group “GAL Prealpi e Dolomiti”**
- Supervisor: Prof. **Laura Secco (TESAF)**
- Secondment supervisor @WUR: Prof. **Maria Tengö**



VERVE is funded by the European Union under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (VERVE H2020-MSCA-IF-2020, Grant Agreement n.101025710). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



Main outputs



An intimate relationship with wetlands (I)



Parco Valle del Menago

<https://www.parcovalledelmenago.it/la-natura/>



An intimate relationship with wetlands (I)



Barene in the Venice Lagoon

PART 2 – PARTICIPATION & PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH (FOR SUSTAINABILITY)

Quick Brainstorming Exercise with Dixit Cards



Take a moment to look at the cards, and then virtually pick one that helps you address the question below, & write a short answer on your paper/pc:

Why may we need participatory research for wetlands restoration?

Participatory Engagement for Sustainability : Why?

UNIVERSALIST (THIN) SUSTAINABILITY VS PROCEDURAL (THICK) SUSTAINABILITY

Meeting current human needs
while preserving the
environment and natural
resources needed by future
generations



(Miller 2013)

The **emergent** property of a discussion
about **desired futures** that's informed by
some **understanding** of the ecological,
social, and economic consequences of
different courses of **action**



(Sellberg et al 2021)

The best of two worlds: TDR & PAR

Transdisciplinary Sustainability Science



“A **reflexive**, integrative, **method-driven** scientific principle aiming at the **solution** or transition of societal problems and concurrently of related scientific problems by differentiating and **integrating knowledge** from **various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge**”

(Lang et al 2012)

Transformative learning
Design / system / future thinking
Appreciative Inquiry and Theory U
Feminist radical epistemologies and care ethics
etc.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

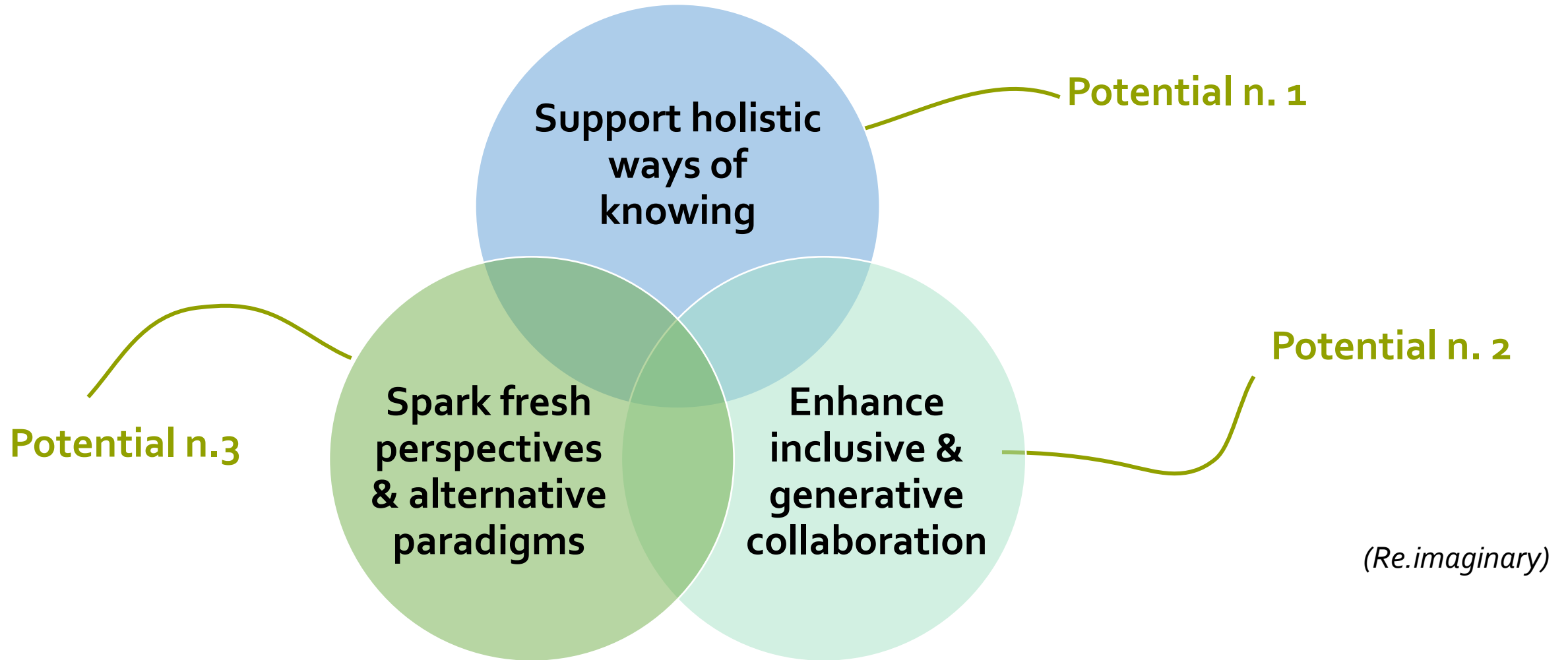


“An approach to **research *with* communities** that emphasizes participation and **action**.
It seeks to understand the world by trying to **change** it, collaboratively and following **reflection**.”

PAR emphasizes **collective inquiry** and **experimentation** grounded in experience and social history, addressing questions and **issues** that are **significant** for those who participate as co-researchers”

(Reason & Bradbury 2008)

CREATIVE METHODS: THREE MAIN POTENTIALS



Transforming the scientific paradigm..



Energy Research & Social Science

Volume 70, December 2020, 101724



Transforming knowledge systems for life on Earth: Visions of future systems and how to get there

Ioan Fazey^a✉, Niko Schöpke^b✉, Guido Caniglia^c✉, Anthony Hodgson^d✉,

Global Sustainability

cambridge.org/sus

Review Article

Cite this article: Horcea-Milcu A-I et al. (2024). Transformative research for sustainability:

Transformative research for sustainability: characteristics, tensions, and moving forward

Andra-Ioana Horcea-Milcu^{1,2} , Ine Dorresteijn³, Julia Leventon⁴ , Milutin Stojanovic^{5,6}, David P.M. Lam⁷, Daniel J. Lang^{7,8}, Angela Moriggi⁹, Christopher M. Raymond^{6,10,11}, Sanna Stålhammar¹², Annika Weiser⁸ and Silja Zimmermann^{3,13,14}

Mode-1 science	Mode-2 science
Academic	Academic and social
Monodisciplinary	Trans- and interdisciplinary
Technocratic	Participative
Certain	Uncertain
Predictive	Exploratory

Aristotele’s Three kinds of knowledge:

- 1) EPISTEME – Scientific Knowledge (*Explicit*)
- 2) TECHNE – Practical knowledge, Know-How (*Tacit*)
- 3) PHRONESIS – Wisdom (*Experiential*)



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Point of View: Rethinking academia in a time of climate crisis

Anne E Urai[✉], Clare Kelly[✉]

ECOSYSTEMS AND PEOPLE

2021, VOL. 17, NO. 1, 292–305

<https://doi.org/10.1080/26395916.2021.1931452>



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH: TEN YEARS OF THE PROGRAM ON ECOSYSTEM CHANGE AND SOCIETY  OPEN ACCESS 

Towards a caring transdisciplinary research practice: navigating science, society and self

My M. Sellberg^{}^a, Jessica Cockburn^{}^b, Petra B. Holden^{}^c and David P. M. Lam^{}^d

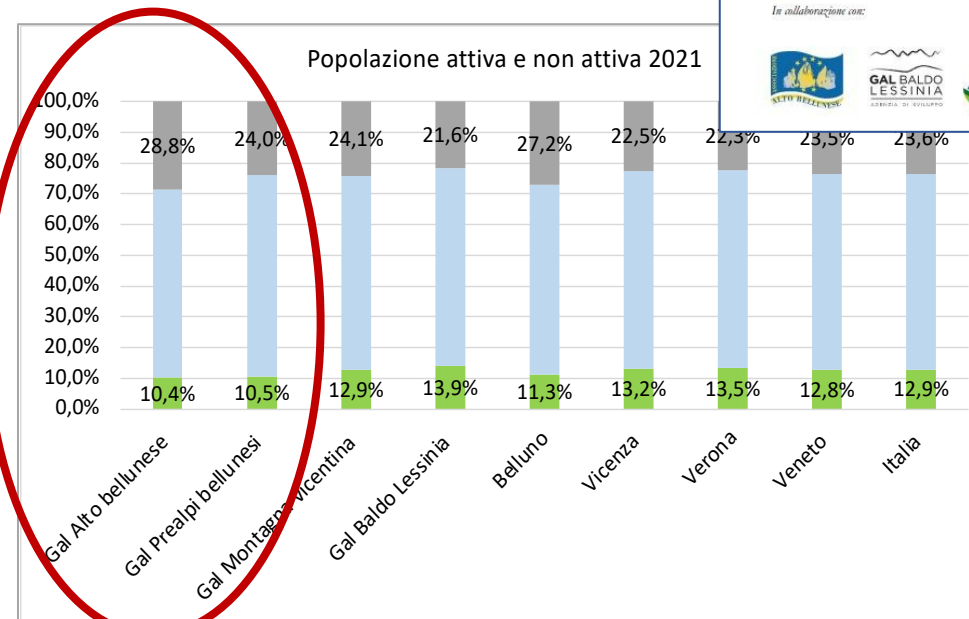


PART 3 – CREATIVE & VISUAL METHODS, the PHOTOVOICE Lab

Belluno province: A fragile inner area

Pressing socio-economic, socio-ecological and socio-cultural issues:

- Depopulation, demographic loss, high dependency ratio;
- Increase in extreme weather events, crisis of natural resources, loss of biodiversity;
- Centralization and cuts to welfare services;
- Impoverished and fragile productive sector;
- Insufficient and scattered formative opportunities;
- Cultural lock-ins (e.g. resistance to change; widespread pessimism; close-mindedness; gendered stereotypes);
- Inadequate institutional support, etc.



Loss of bio-cultural diversity: a dystopia unfolding now

"A dynamic, place-based, aspect of nature arising from links and feedbacks between human-cultural diversity and biological diversity"

(Bridgewater and Rotherham 2018)

"The interconnections between biological, cultural and linguistic diversity"

(IPBES report on "Different Valuations of nature", 2022)



The ethics of «seeing»

«Aesthetic consumerism»

- Ongoing exposure to too many images creates dependance and dismissal at the same time
- «Everyone is a photographer»
- Dominant reality is constantly reinforced, and its experience magnified

(Susan Sontag, in «Regarding the pain of others»)

© Edward Burtynsky

Art as sublimation

Art teaches us to look with kinder and more attentive eyes at what is around us; to sublimate suffering, the apparently insignificant, ugly or that one would normally not want to see

(Alain de Botton)



AMBIENTE / OPINIONI

Il fiume Po sta morendo ma nessuno lo osserva veramente

di Paolo Pileri — 29 Marzo 2022

Le immagini del grande fiume ridotto a un rigagnolo dovrebbero smuoverci e invece nessuno - a partire dalla classe politica nazionale e locale - sta prestando attenzione. Nel frattempo il greto e gli argini vengono usati come piste da motocross. Il racconto di Paolo Pileri



© Paolo Pileri

From Acott's paper

With reference to photography, photographs can create or consolidate a sense of place, challenging us to notice things otherwise overlooked or present the world in ways that run counter to dominant readings. In the words of Wells (2011) 'photographic vision thus entangles knowledge discourses, the technical and the aesthetic within both processes of production of images and those of viewing and interpretation' (p. 11). Photographs don't just communicate, as Sontag argues, '... picture taking is an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights—to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on. Our very sense of situation is now articulated by the camera's interventions' (Sontag, 1977, p. 11). Photographs can draw attention to happenings in the world and invite explanatory reflections in the form of narratives. This narrative-driven approach to relationality expands opportunities away from seeing the world in purely instrumental terms. Photography can explore (however partially) places in ways that include but go beyond nature's instrumental use by people and can offer a way of revealing and drawing attention to human/nature relations. Photography has the potential to shape cultural imaginations and experiences of the world around us (Acott & Urquhart, 2015). This sets the context for this photo-essay which explores my use of photography to contribute to a cultural understanding of wetlands.

12 T. G. ACOTT



Figure 13. Whose environment? Nr Oare Marshes, Kent.

Photo Voice Lab: main methodological ingredients

A **qualitative visual research** method, often bringing to light dismissed or marginalized issues

A **social engagement** tool, giving voice to people's views & visions through the combination of pictures & short stories

Key elements: participation, critical reflection, creative expression, personal & collective awareness.

(Santinello et al 2021, Masterson, Mahajan, & Tengö, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997)



(EXTRA) Co-creation through:

- Somatic learning
- Storytelling
- Generative dialoguing
- Collaborative framing
- Active listening

PhotoVoice in psychology studies



Formazione sul Photovoice per studenti di psicologia "Reframing Rome. I giovani universitari come risorsa per la città di Roma"

Pink digital revolution: storytelling fotografico, donne e lavoro

Metodo: STORYTELLING FOTOGRAFICO e PHOTOVOICE

Descrizione: percorsi esperienziali per lo sviluppo di competenze tecniche e trasversali legate all'occupabilità in un'ottica di miglioramento dell'autoconsapevolezza di sé e del proprio valore professionale.

Partecipanti: 12 donne disoccupate, inattive o occupate residenti o domiciliate nelle province di Treviso e Vicenza.



Formazione sul Photovoice per studenti di psicologia: "Tanta roba! Riscoprire la bellezza nelle nostre comunità locali"

Aims (content-related) of the PhotoVoice Co-creative Labs

STEP 1

Explore participants' understanding of **human-nature relations** in their places, through 4 lenses (*what gives life; interdependence; invisible; nature as mentor*).

STEP 2

Explore participants' views of their places, thinking of **what they like**, what they **don't like**, & how they could **support the change** (thinking of the socio-ecological system).

(Moriggi 2021, Pearson 2021; etc.)

I giovani del territorio bellunese sono invitati a...

OSSERVARE per RIGENERARE
Sguardi, Parole, Visioni sul Territorio

LABORATORIO DI PHOTO-VOICE

Hai tra i 18 e i 29 anni?
Hai a cuore il territorio bellunese?
Ti piace fare foto?

COME FUNZIONA

4 laboratori di gruppo (da metà maggio a fine giugno 2023)
2 mercoledì h19-21 (online) + 2 sabati h14-17 (in presenza)
Sede: Fondazione Angelini (Belluno centro)
Formazione teorica sui temi del laboratorio
Formazione tecnica su fotografia outdoor

CONTATTI
Per iscrizioni usa il QR code o il link bit.ly/3nA3zRQ
Per informazioni:
angela.moriggi@unipd.it

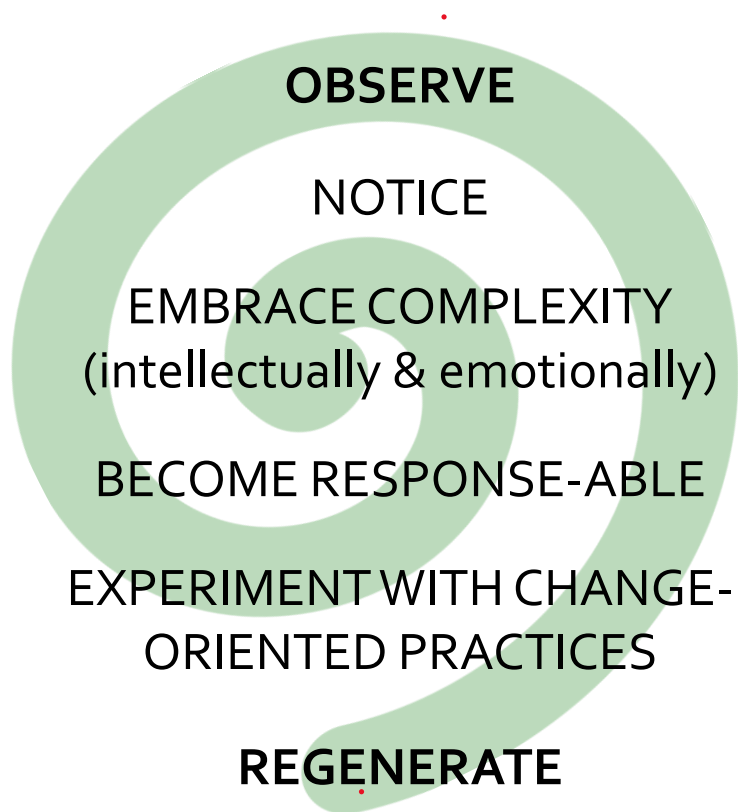
PERCHÈ PARTECIPARE

- Trattare temi urgenti: sostenibilità trasformativa e rigenerazione socio-ecologica
- Sviluppare competenze trasversali
- Sperimentare approcci co-creativi
- Condividere conoscenze e amore per i luoghi
- Conoscere altri giovani e costruire reti e relazioni
- Esporre le tue foto a **Oltre Le Vette 2023**

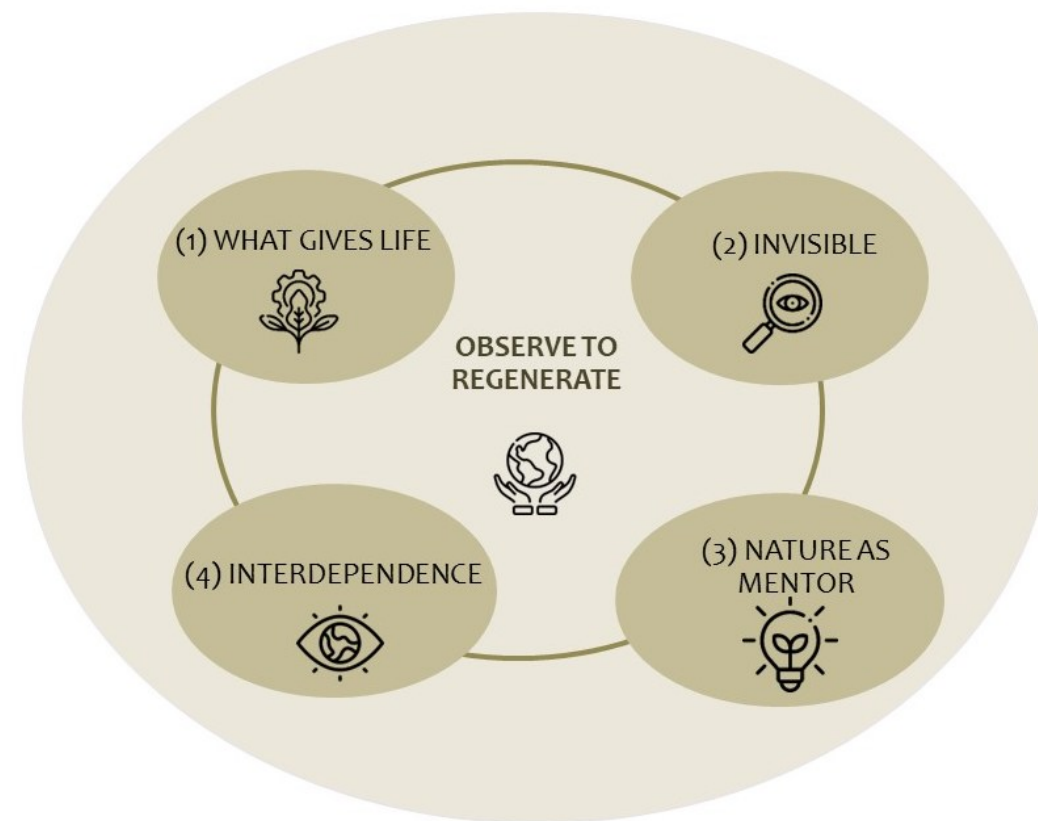
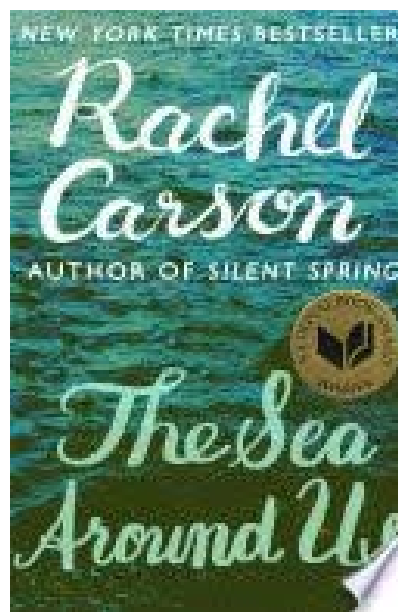
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«Observe to Regenerate»: the theme of the PhotoVoice Lab



(Moriggi et al 2020)



(Moriggi et al, in progress)



Amnesia

There are places where, all of a sudden, you find yourself at the border between present and future, and you watch, helpless, the irreversible process of life transforming into memory.

Step by step, forgetfulness and collective amnesia take over reality and push it to oblivion, with all its elements: the sounds of the sawmill, the babble of the Piave river, the hoofs on the trail, the baskets full of wood.

The woods devour the plain, the ivy suffocates the past.

Picture taken at Termine di Cadore (Belluno) by E. (37 y).

Question asked: *Where do you see interdependence (or disconnection) in the socio-ecological system of your territory?*



From the sea to the mountains

Dolomites and Venice: so different and yet so similar. Their richness is also their ruin: mass tourism. Tourism is like a drug for them: they can't live without it, and in the meanwhile, it destroys their soul. Often times, decisions are taken favouring tourists and visitors, at the expenses of the environment and of local people. And so these people move, and bring their culture and their traditions away from those places. And like that, these places, once amazing and full of life, become empty.

Picture taken at Col Gallina (Belluno) by G. (25 y)

Question asked: What do you find disturbing? (thinking of your territory and its socio-ecological system as a whole)



Question asked: *What makes you feel at home? (thinking of your territory and its socio-ecological system as a whole)*

Mountain elevations

When I go to the plains or to the sea, I feel a bit lost, almost disquiet, as I don't find the reference points on the horizons I have when in the mountains.

The homogenous landscapes of the plains or the infinite ones of the sea are not soothing for me; in fact, they almost disturb me.

When, instead, I start seeing irregular traits on the horizon, that is the mountain elevations, then yes, I feel better, I feel surrounded, enwrapped, almost protected by the heterogeneity of nature. I feel much more at home.

Picture taken at Villiago (Belluno) by N. (28 years).



Question asked: *Where do you see interdependence (or disconnection) in the socio-ecological system of your territory?*

Saper non aspettare

There is no disconnection without interdependence. I realized it looking at a rope that once secured a dislodged boulder in an abandoned place. Every time we see disconnection, we recognize the interdependence now broken. A connection that perhaps earlier we couldn't see. [...]
These disconnections remind me that Man must find his meaning in Nature. [...]
I don't have the answer.
I simply wish to recognize interconnections before they break.

Photo taken in the un-hospitable woods of Ospitale di Cadore by Sebastiano (29 y)

Questions:

What struck you from the pictures and stories?

What themes emerge?

Participatory engagement of youth: why

Existing national studies show:

.....young people wish to **stay or return to inner areas**
.....they care about **natural environments** and are interested in sustainable retro-innovations, but don't necessarily know of regenerative practices

But challenges on the ground:

- **Difficulty to reach out** and engage youth (on a continuous basis and creating long-last networks);
- Formative and networking activities lack space for **expression** and replicate old **power dynamics**;
- No deep exploration of **mindsets**, values, and visions on place-based **human-nature relations**;
- High degree of **fragmentation of virtuous initiatives**, making it hard to know & engage.



Process aims: enabling social learning & change

Work in progress – not for sharing

- **Safe space to voice views**, needs, aspirations;
- **Transferable skills** like critical thinking, co-creation, active listening, generative dialoging, collaborative framing, etc.;
- **Connections, alliances** with other young people, local institutions & projects;
- Reach out to **wider public and local institutions**, through travelling exhibition across the territory.



Final critical reflections

Critical role of
action-research!

- **Science-driven co-creation processes** aimed at deeply innovating ways of thinking, relating, and collaborating are **urgently needed** in rural-mountain areas;
- Such processes require **substantial investments** in time, competences, and continuous engagement by all stakeholders' involved;
- **Assessment mechanisms** should consider both **tangible and intangible benefits** and both short- and long-term outcomes & impacts;
- **Institutional support** is needed at all levels to make participatory action-research more effective and impactful for rural-mountain communities.

Work in progress – not for sharing

VERVE's relevant Outputs & References

Toolkit in progress:

«Visioning methods for regenerative rural futures»

Papers in progress /submitted:

- Moriggi A., Secco L., Tengo M., et al. **“Regenerative thinking through Photovoice with youth: exploring human-nature relations in a rural-mountain area”**;
- Moriggi A., Secco L., Tengo M., et al. **“Co-creative visioning to regenerate rural areas: an empirical study in Italy's North Eastern Alps”**;
- Moriggi A., Tassone V., de Vrieze A., Ormond M. et al. **“A care lens to explore transdisciplinary transformative practices”**;
- Laycock Pedersen R., Nikulina V., Chineme T., Subroto S., Robinson Z., Winkler K., Luederitz C., Metson G., Malmborg K., Moriggi A., Lam D.P.M., Partelow S., Bhurekeni J., Cockburn J. **“Differences between transdisciplinary and action research in sustainability science”**;
- Dalla Torre C., Moriggi A., Elzenbaumer B., Ferretti M., Favargiotti S., **“Co-creating a rural festival with and for rural communing initiatives: a transdisciplinary place-based approach”**, Submitted to *Ecology and Society*.

Thank you for your attention! Keep in touch!

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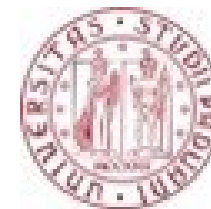
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VERVE

CO-CREATIVE VISIONING PROCESSES
FOR TRANSFORMATIVE
SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL AREAS

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