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Dethroning the planetary perspective: Dealing with actually-occurring transformations using dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology

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Abstract

Transformation studies have been leaning towards the more practical aspects of change processes and have not yet dealt sufficiently with their personal and political dimensions. They are arguably constrained in doing so if they are either overly focussed on systems and how to control them or on individualistic values and behaviours. In this study we show how the *actually-occurring societal transformati*ons that people face can be usefully approached through the lenses of dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology. While distinct, these approaches share a concern with aspects missed when transformation is abstracted and alienated from people's lives; namely people's lived experiences during times of change, and the conditions of possibility for these experiences.

Dialogical sense-making explores how people create meaning around transformations, through interactions with other people, with different lines of arguments, and as part of broader

public discourse. Critical phenomenology engages with subjectivity and lived experience, and with the role of foundational as well as socio-culturally dominant yet contingent structures in shaping our ways of perceiving, experiencing and knowing the world. Through a discussion of insights from these approaches, we show how they offer tools that enable new questions about transformative change as it is experienced and made sense of. Situating analyses of tranformation from within a focus on experience brings us closer to understanding the significance of change processes in people's lives and allows for an inquiry into the conditions of experience, including transformative experiences.

Keywords: sense making analysis; critical phenomenology; sustainability transformations;

Introduction

The literature on sustainability transformations has exploded in recent years in the face of increasing impacts and threats from environmental crises facing humanity. Whilst this explosion represents both a broadening and deepening of the available scholarship on transformation, a planetary solutions logic still permeates much of the literature. Indisputably, transformative environmental changes express themselves on a global level. Their drivers, including consumption and production patterns, are formed by world economy structures, and demand international cooperation in response. However *global-problem-requires-global-solutions*-thinking risks becoming universalizing, devoid of context, and instrumentalist (Nightingale et al., 2020). Assuming globally common interests, pathways and courses of action, this perspective seems to point towards a universal destination for desired sustainable societies around the world (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997; Hajer and Fischer 1999; Linnér 2003; Barry, 2012).

Transformation is a comprehensive concept, referring to fundamental and enduring, non-linear structural societal change that encompasses technological, economic, political, cultural, social as well as environmental processes (Feola 2015; Linnér and Wibeck 2019; Patterson et al 2017). Yet, a predominant focus of sustainability transformations research is on the more technical, practical and organisational aspects of transformations (Nightingale et al., 2020). If one takes a planetary, mechanistic or universalising perspective, this risks translating into a rather shallow appreciation of the inter-subjective dimensions of transformative change processes, and and an associated neglect of their implications (Scoones et al., Patterson et al., 2017; Beck et al, 2021). Certain concerns may be portrayed as more valuable than others. The particular orientations and values that co-develop in transformation scholarship shape the character of the field, establish an *a priori* ontology and epistemological assumptions that prefigure the analysis, and privilege questions of outcome at the expense of questions about process or the conditions of experience (Scoones et al., 2015; Nightingale, et al., 2020; West et al., 2020; Beck et al., 2021). Such orientations are said to influence pathways of change themselves (Priebe et al., 2021).

The present study begins from an acknowledgement that the current preoccupation with creating research *for* transformation misses classes of transformative change and constituencies of people in transformation studies that weaken our understandings of transformative change more broadly (Moore et al., 2021). For instance, it may preclude an analysis of how experiences of environmental change can be epistemically and personally transformative (Benessaiah and Eakin, 2021; Jones, 2018; Nicholas, 2021; O'Brien, 2021). It can also miss how socio-cultural structures can help shape

these very experiences. This may translate into impoverished theories about transformative change the conditions in which it arises, and how it is experienced in terms of sense and meaning.

Addressing these gaps can also contribute to growing awareness of the need to capture negative or involuntary aspects of societal transformations emerging in the just transitions and transformations literature, which emphasises the role of social difference and power relations, helping to explain important phenomena, such as ambiguity, and resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016; Woroniecki et al., 2019).

Scholars are increasingly recognising that the question of how people shape and are shaped by transformative change needs deeper and broader attention (Stålhammar, 2020; Nightingale et al., 2021). Other researchers have made important inroads into these gaps and contributed interesting new avenues for transformations research, including social innovations (Pel et al., 2020). There have been important steps to understanding the ways that people are at the head and heart of change processes, drawing on the personal and organisational change literature (Westley et al., 2013; Wamsler et al., 2021; O'Brien 2021). Particularly the work by Karen O'Brien and Linda Sygna (O'Brien and Sygna 2013; O'Brien 2018) emphasizes the personal and political dimensions of transformation. They outline three interacting 'spheres' in which transformations occur: the practical, the political and the personal sphere. While the practical sphere encompasses e.g., socio-technical innovations, managerial reforms, and lifestyle changes, the political sphere focusses on governance (especially formal and informal institutions), and other reified social forms, such as collectives and social movements. The personal sphere focusses on, for instance, subjectivity, values, beliefs, discourses, and paradigms; categories of things which are evidently not individualistic. In addition to O'Brien's and Sygna's focus on 'individual and collective beliefs, values and worldviews' (2013: 5), we argue that the personal sphere also contains the plurality of people's lived experience of health, wellbeing, (in)security, and loss, amidst much else of daily life and social interactions.

Recently there has been a turn towards the power of storytelling, imagination and narratives to shape change processes (Milkoreit 2017; O'Brien et al 2019; Veland et al 2019; Moore and Milkoreit, 2020; Behagel and Mert, 2021; Stripple et al., 2021; Uhrqvist et al., 2021; Riedy 2021). Also, recent research focuses on the notion of transformative experience and 'inner transformations', sometimes with a focus on events and happenings that occur in an individual's life that change their values and priorities towards more sustainable attitudes (Stålhammar, 2021; Wamsler et al., 2021). In contrast to the mechanistic structuralism and technological determinism still implicit in much of the scholarship focussed on the practical sphere of transformation, these new avenues in transformation research prioritise the neglected personal and political spheres of transformation.

Despite these vital contributions, key questions remain. It is still not clear how to hold together the personal, political and practical dimensions of transformation in a coherent way (Cook et al., 2016). Further, questions of how already-occurring climate and environmental-related changes are experienced – how for example the world, oneself, others or time appear to persons who live these changes, in a first-person perspective – and how these changes can help form our capacity to experience the world, are rarely asked.

The aim of this article is to contribute to a framework that goes beyond universalising approaches, to study *actually-occurring transformations*. These are the myriad processes of transformative change that are already happening across the world, simultaneously and often in concert. They involve a diversity of experiences, that may be comparatively positive and negative, both deliberate and involuntary, as well as producing winners and losers (Patterson et al., 2017). Further, and more specifically, we want to contribute tools for the study of actually-occurring transformations that holds together attention to the experiential, personal and political, and attends to structures of experience that help shape the ways people perceive, experience, and know the world in times of fundamental change.

Our contribution to the strand of people-centric transformation studies should not be mistaken as individualistic, where people are located as separate entities independent of societies they are embedded within. We take a relational perspective on transformation (West et al. 2020,), which sees people as critically enmeshed in – indeed, as constituted through – relations with the human and non-human elements of our world. This can be put even stronger: transformations, such as climate related changes, can have such fundamental effects as shaping our identities, our ways of experiencing who we are and "how we make sense of things" (Guenther, 2020). Here we seek to contribute more specifically to exploring the implications of understanding people's embeddedness in transformative processes as situated selves. Thus, transformative changes are seen in terms of the ways people understand themselves in relation to what is changing around them.

We introduce two different theoretical perspectives, dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology, that can contribute significantly to this shift. The dialogical approach to sense-making analysis provides tools for dealing with meaning-making and differentiated experience coherently across all kinds of actually-occurring transformations and enables researchers to address the processual and relational characteristics of transformation in the necessary detail and depth (c.f West et al., 2020). Critical phenomenology is an emerging branch of phenomenological philosophy, and as with other forms of phenomenological philosophy, it engages with subjectivity from a first-person perspective and structures that help shape experience. Further, in contrast to some more traditional forms of phenomenology, it also engages with socio-cultural, contingent structures such as dominant norms about bodies or ways of life that help shape our ways of perceiving, experiencing, and knowing the world, and critically interrogates how these help structure experience (cf. Guenther 2020; Weiss, Salamon & Murphy 2020; Ferrari et al 2018)[i]. It seeks to scrutinize taken-for-granted dimensions of experience thereby allowing transformation of the understanding of that experience (cf. Weiss et al 2020). The dialogical sense-making and phenomenological contributions can honour the potential for transformation studies in unleashing "new ways of making sense of the predicaments of our time and the inevitable shifts we are making" (Linnér and Wibeck, 2019, p 5).

Our enquiry is structured as follows. We start by laying out three observations about the current state of the field of transformative change and what is missing. We then introduce dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology. We will discuss how these approaches make complementary contributions to understand actually-occuring transformation, through reference to a specific case of actually-occurring transformation. This will demand a reinterpretation of transformation in some important ways.

Three Observations

- Observation 1: Transformation research commonly attempts to transform systems towards planetary sustainability.

A dominant emphasis in transformations literature in recent years has been on learning how to deliberately transform systems towards sustainability and use this knowledge to intervene in systems in order to incite transformative change (Leventon et al., 2021a). This is what some scholars refer to as solutions-oriented research or transformative research – that is, research *for* transformations – in contrast to the more limited strand on descriptive-analytical transformation research, or research *on* transformations (Feola 2015; WGBU, 2011). In research *for* transformations, attention has for instance been focused on locating "positive tipping points" or identifying system leverage points (Abson et al., 2017; Leventon et al., 2021a). The outcome (i.e., a desirable system state) has been set-out a *priori* to the investigation: "societal transformation *towards sustainability"* (Linnér and Wibeck, p 3), though it is rarely clear what sustainability or transformation entails and for whom (Scoones et al., 2015; Pathways Network, 2021).

Global-problem-requires-global-solutions thinking compels abstraction and objectification as though they were inevitable aspects of transformation. Normative aspects are made implicit, and the research act becomes a search for apparently neutral facts (such as 'science-based targets'). There is a shedding of the value propositions of a given situation, in favour of fighting for a singular value proposition assumed to be held by all (universalizing sustainability).

The drawing away from human conditions of experience of transformation towards the abstract planetary perspective privileges larger scales of change, and particular kinds of universalising politics and governance. These forms of imagining transformation are co-produced with particular forms of governance and thus have concrete implications besides their epistemic consequences (Castree, 2021; Forsyth; 2021).

The movements into abstract space are presumably seen as necessary responses to the gravity, depth and breadth of the threats. However, when environmental problems are abstracted to the level of climate change and biodiversity loss, for instance, or further abstracted into planetary boundaries and system tipping points, they lose their local, essential, and phenomenal qualities (Jasanoff, 2010) and how they come to matter to people (O Brien, 2021). There is an opportunity to focus research more on the latter, to explore the implications of these aspects and their roles in transformative change processes.

- Observation 2: Many kinds of transformative change are undesirable or involuntary.

In much transformations literature, there has been an emphasis on deliberate transformations (Leventon et al., 2021a). Comparatively fewer studies have focussed on the surprising outcomes of change processes that are not necessarily or universally deliberate or desirable, especially from the perspective of marginalised groups (Linnér and Wibeck 2019; Mehta et al., 2021; Schipper et al., 2021).

Whilst sustainability transformations are seen as desirable, voluntary shifts in the world-system, environmental threats and trends are the undercurrent of a planet transforming in response to human activity. These threats and trends represent undesirable, involuntary transformations (Barry, 2012; Tschakert et al., 2013. Though perceptions of agency and desirability both stem from people's everyday lived experience, this is often lost or simply assumed in the movement into abstract systems science and governance (Tschakert 2013).

This comes at a price, given that locating these frames in people's lives would allow analysis of transformative change to be grounded in experience and meaning (Nightingale et al., 2021). It discounts the possibility of asking what people go through when the world changes and how this affects them as situated selves, including their politics, relations, and practices (Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Manuel-Navarrette and Pelling, 2015; Castree, 2021).

Actually-occurring transformations alter our ways of life and living conditions, changing our sense of ourselves in relation to our environments, provoking feelings such as vulnerability, danger, loss, or anger (Armiero and de Rosa, 2017). This makes them quintessential transformative experiences. Such experiences are shaped by personal, political, and practical aspects of people's lives (c.f. Gelves-Gómez and Brincat, 2021; Jackson, 2021). Actually-occurring transformations affect people's ways of experiencing themselves, their embodied relations with others and the world. The fact of this contingency is an opportunity to highlight their taken-for-grantedness, and understand how these changing conditions of experience influence change processes.

- <u>Observation 3: Even deliberate transformations are experienced differently by actors from various standpoints</u>

Various configurations of desirability and agency are possible even in the same transformative change process, and different transformations are experienced and made sense of in particular ways depending on a person's standpoint (Hoque et al., 2018; Nightingale et al., 2021). This denies the possibility of *a priori* categorizations of change. No single transformation is objectively desirable or undesirable in its entirety, no matter the aggregate or utilitarian effect. Nor can any transformation be seen as uniformly intended or unintended. Transformative change escapes the capacity of science to know conclusively about the outcomes of a particular intervention. Societal transformation is an inherently contingent process (Olsson et al., 2006). Furthermore, what looks both desirable and intentional from the standpoint of one person may look very different from those with different standpoints.

When no transformation is simply either voluntary or involuntary, desirable or undesirable, new obligations are created, shifting the epistemic and normative orientation of the researcher towards the change process itself and the ways that different people are differentially bound up with the change process. Paying attention to the process opens it up to enquiring how it invokes, transmits, challenges, or reifies social differences and relations of power.

This openness allows transformative processes to be questioned differently: voluntary and desirable for whom? Research shows us that the ways that people relate to change processes often depends

on their footings within relations of power (Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014; Nightingale, 2017). This matters especially in a world where transformative changes are not universally accepted, and consensus positions on change are rare and not necessarily even desirable (Mehleb, 2021; Schipper et al., 2021).

No transformations are deterministic movements from A to B, but rather emerge from the politically-charged interactions between actors enmeshed within complex socio-ecological configurations and contingent and dialectical outcomes (Pelling et al., 2015; Eriksen et al., 2015). In these situations, the abstract, universal criteria that are often used to frame sustainability transformations, such as planetary boundaries and negative tipping points, can be complexity blinders (Priebe et al., 2021). People's priorities may lie in more proximate concerns about risks, safety, desire, and the reliability and accountability of those entrusted with governance responsibilities (Ensor et al., 2019). Changes may also involve different forms of loss and create various emotional affects (Tschakert et al., 2013; Albrecht, 2019). These are dimensions of transformations that are not amenable to abstraction and reduction to the quantitative, technical criteria associated with the planetary perspective.

Further, while transformations can be experienced and made sense of in different ways depending on a person's standpoint, an outstanding opportunity is to ask questions about the conditions of possibility for experience and the structures that help shape experience. This requires an examination of the situatedness of knowledge production for transformative change and when acknowledging their philosophical implications; a departure from classical subject-object distinctions.

In view of our observations of which new research avenues may further enrich the field of transformations studies, we now turn to dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology as approaches that are well positioned to offer a complementary analysis.

Dialogical Sense-Making

Dialogical sense-making offers an understanding of interaction and its cultural contexts (Wibeck and Linnér, 2021). Dialogism is an epistemological framework that is concerned with how people gain knowledge about and attribute meaning to the world, and with the roles of cognition, communication, and action in sense-making (Linell, 2009). Starting from the assumption that "our being in the world is thoroughly interdependent with the existence of others" (Linell, 2004, p 5), dialogism emphasises the context-dependency of sense-making, taking into account both situated interactions and socio-historical backgrounds.

Dialogism homes in on social interaction for the formation of identity and subjectivity (Voloshinov, 1930) and even talks about the "dialogical self", which is "contextually interdependent with others and with contexts, moving between different positionings but still part of continuities" (Linell, 2009:113). This "other-orientation" shapes sense-making, in interaction with others and with the surrounding world (Bakhtin, 1986; Linell, 2009; Marková et al., 2007). Dialogical sense-making in particular analyses how the processes of ascribing meaning to the world are produced not by individuals thinking and acting alone but rather through interactions and dialogues, both directly

with other people in a particular interaction but also as part of broader public discourse and in interaction with different ideas, arguments, and standpoints (Marková et al., 2007).

The basic principles of dialogism – including relationism and the emphasis on situated as well as socio-historic contexts, and interactions – have been translated into a framework for dialogical sense-making analysis (Wibeck and Linnér, 2021) that can help shed light on how people experience and make sense of actually-occurring transformations. The goal of dialogical sense-making analysis is to try to understand the content of communications and analyse the communicative processes through which meaning-making occurs. It is thus designed to capture both content and process, i.e., enabling broad explorations of standpoints, understandings, and social representations, while also supporting in-depth analysis of how linguistic or other meaning-making resources are used in communication.

A dialogical approach to sense-making acknowledges both intersubjectivity and common ground, and the asymmetries, tensions, and conflicting perspectives that may be expressed and experienced in communication (Linell, 2004; Marková, 2003). Dialogical sense-making therefore seeks to explore commonalities as well as varieties or conflicts in sense-making in different contexts and among different groups of actors.

Dialogical sense-making allows us to analyse the narratives, metaphors, stories, frames, and values that comprise particular modes of making sense of changing situations for subjects. Each of these has its own methods and approaches, though they can be brought together under the umbrella of dialogical sense-making analysis. Such analysis has recently been applied in a sustainability transformations setting by Linnér and Wibeck (2019; see also Wibeck and Linnér, 2021 and Wibeck et al., 2022). The focus of such studies may differ, but may for example be directed to focus group participants' stories of current unsustainability and their visions for sustainable futures (Wibeck et al, 2019), or core narratives of transformation processes (Linnér and Wibeck, 2019). Sense-making analysis can either be used for mono-strand studies, where one type of data is collected, or it can be applied in a more comprehensive way, integrating different types of data that can be analysed both vertically, exploring each type of sense-making strategy for each data set, or horizontally, in exploration of e.g. core narratives or master metaphors that recur across data sets. This allows for a treatment of scales of sense-making.

Phenomenology and Critical Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical practice that investigates subjectivity, lived experiences, and structures of experience, i.e., structures that shape our ways of perceiving and experiencing the world, others and ourselves. While traditional phenomenology has centred on invariant structures of experience (such as temporality), critical phenomenology builds on and engages with insights from for example feminist, critical race or decolonial scholarly work and has opened up for analyses of how also contingent socio-cultural and historical structures including power relations can help shape our ways of perceiving or experiencing something and in so doing "play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience" (Guenter 2020: 12; Ferrari et al 2018).[ii] Despite this difference in foci, there is a shared attention to how the world is experienced by the subject, in a first-person perspective, and constituted in terms of sense and meaning. Further, phenomenological

research moves away from dualistic understandings of mind vs body and subject vs object and instead conceptualizes subjectivity as an embodied relation to the world (Merleau-Ponty 2015). It seeks to make explicit, clarify, and better understand aspects of experience that otherwise are taken for granted, in order to disclose basic structures of existence. We take three foci from phenomenology and the sub strand of critical phenomenology.

First, phenomenologists have examined constitutive conditions of the production of knowledge and underlined that ideas of thoroughly extracting the self or subjectivity in order to create an "objective" natural science are misleading, since human knowledge production always rests on the existential conditions of the human being in the world. It invites the study of how different kinds of knowledges are constituted, and how subjects make use of different frameworks and methodological tools in the constitution of knowledge.

Second, we see phenomenological investigations of embodiment and perception, and the role of embodiment for perception, as promising for transformation studies. Phenomenologically, perception is understood in terms of intentionality (as a directedness) and as a relation between the person seeing and that which this person sees: what the seer sees depends on what stands out as foreground and what becomes background for this person, and what we perceive is interwoven with our way of engaging with the world and informed by our bodily possibilities and perceptual and motor habits. In this understanding of perception, offered by Merleau-Ponty (2014[1945]) and elaborated by Alia Asia Al-Saji in an analysis of racialized perception (2014), we do not simply record what passes by the retinal field, but "learn to see". And in learning to see, it is "not only the body that is recast by habit, the perceived world is differentiated and configured in new ways; it appears differently" (Al-Saji 2009: 377).

Of relevance for transformation studies is a critical phenomenology take on perception that is attentive to for example how socio-political, historical, and epistemological structures of privilege can help normalise and naturalise certain ways of seeing –. Of relevance is also the emphasis on the need to critically examine "the patterns according to which we see" as well as what we see (Guenther, 2020: 16). Depending on how the world is opened up to the self according to habits of perception and movement, and lived norms about bodies, some routes of actions or choices or objects may be perceived and experienced as available, possible and desirable for the self more so than others (see for example Malmqvist and Zeiler, 2010).

Third, we see a phenomenological focus on the structures as well as content of transformative experiences as particularly appropriate for the field of transformation studies. We understand transformative experiences as experiences that fundamentally change people's values and desires and can transform their understandings of themselves and the world. They can provide "forms or degrees of knowledge and understanding that were previously unavailable and, more importantly, previously inaccessible, insofar as they depend on having the relevant experience," and be culturally shaped and constrained in a myriad of ways (Carel and Kidd, 2020: 119). However, if studied via critical phenomenology, we contend, the analysis of these experiences can shed additional light not only on how the world, oneself, others or time (as some examples) appear to the self in these experiences, but also on how socio-culturally and historically shared understandings of these transformations can help shape one's ways of making sense of the world and be constitutive of one's

sense of self. Further, in line with the phenomenological understanding of affectivity as not an additional extra to add to a "neutral" world, but as a mode of engaging with the world and that through which the world matter to us and appear to us in distinct ways, phenomenological philosophy can shed light on "existential feelings", i.e., feelings where what is felt is a change in the relation between self and world – in "one's way of finding oneself in a world" (Ratcliffe 2011: 2) that may be integral to experiences of actually-occuring climate related transformations. Finally, critical phenomenology recognises and challenges structures that help shape, and "privilege, naturalize, normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others" and seek to pull "up traces of history […] that still shapes the emergence of meaning" (Guenther 2020: 15).

Actually-occuring Transformations: Dialogical Sense-Making and Critical Phenomenology Approaches

To illustrate the different offerings of dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology, we provide an example of how involuntary transformations can be experienced and made sense of (Box 1). The interview excerpts are taken from a project forming part of the research programme **DETAILS WITHHELD FOR PURPOSES OF PEER REVIEW**. This project focuses on sense-making of climate change impacts and responses in Pacific Island States and communities.

Box 1 Illustrating Actually-Occuring Transformations in the Pacific Islands

Pacific peoples have intimate relationships with the places and the communities they live in, developed over many generations, and expressed in language, customs, and religious beliefs. People rely heavily on the land, the coast and on the ocean. All these elements are part of who people are (Handmer and Nalau, 2018; Anantharajah, 2019; Pill, 2020;; Mcnamara et al., 2021; Yee et al., 2022)

   Across the Pacific Islands, people are used to coping with uncertainty and dramatic weather, and dealing with the specific challenges presented by the landscape, community, and society they live in. However, this is a part of the world that is changing faster in response to climate change than others.

   In qualitative conversational interviews, we talked to a number of stakeholders from Pacific Islands about their understandings and experiences of climate-related losses and damages. In many of the interviewees' narrations, they referred to experiences of climate-driven losses and damages that go beyond material and economic impacts and refer to more profound changes in relationships between community members and their surrounding environments. For example, one of the interviewees gave the following account of how this person's ways of life and perceptions of the ocean have changed:

"There is something often referred to as the intangible impacts of climate change. When loss and damages are discusssed it often centers around the visble tangibles, and I can understand it because we can quantify those the impacts that are physical and that are visible. But I think important issues that need to be considered with the loss and damage include culture, well-being, way of life, those things that are intangible; the loss of my way of life because of the changing climate I can no longer enjoy. Like the ocean, the beach that used to provide sustenance and nutrition. It used to be a friend, a hope. It has turned into a monster that is coming after me. That is a huge loss to islanders, communities and people that is not tangible and is not featured prominently in the discussions of loss damage. It is referred to like generally in terms of culture but for people who live on the islands it is something that is hugely impactful in terms of the mental pressure it puts on us. I walk to the beach

from my house, it takes me about less than 10 minutes, nice white sandy beaches. You see the changes happening there and you see the damage to properties. The beach and the ocean is no longer attractive in terms of the peace and serenity that it provided for generations before me. In my generation it has become a monster for lack of better words, and I think that is something that is not being drawn into the discussion adequately ... Climate change has infected the mental health of Pacific Islanders in ways that are more devastating than the loss of properties and that is something that will live with us for generations to come.”

This narrative illustrates feelings and experiences that result from environmental and climate-related transformative changes that others have described more generally for Pacific Island countries (Mcnamara et al., 2021).

Interviewees in our study addressed both responding to actually occurring transformations, such as their altered environment, and deliberate attempts to navigate toward desired societal goals. They expressed their determination to bring forward their and others’ stories to global climate policy arenas, in an effort to shape conversations and bring about transformative change, as touched upon by another informant:

“ (…) These countries are vulnerable, they’re on the front lines of climate change. They are experiencing the worst of a changing climate. They're experiencing loss and damage. I think the political voice and the voice of Pacific people is something which is … shaping the conversations at the multilateral level.(…) And we need to be lending our voices in.. conversations on loss and damage, on adaptation finance in terms of more on-the-ground resources…. So that's very important. (…) It's never a one way road but I think it's a two way conversation, both bringing the global conversation at home but as well as feeding into the global conversation with experiences and the narratives from the Pacific.”

In our research, we payed special attention to the ways that people experience and make sense of actually-occurring transformations, and the responses and actions that people take. Here we will highlight what kinds of questions an analysis from each of dialogical sense making and critical phenomenology perspectives invite.

Given that dialogical sense-making is concerned with socially-shared knowledge, how meanings are shaped in interaction between participants in spoken or written exchanges, and between different ideas and arguments and in relation to different societal discourses (Marková et al 2007), sense-making analysis would focus on commonalities and variations in how different actor groups in Pacific Island States understand the causes and effects of, as well as preferred responses to, climate change. It would ask for instance how people make sense of climate change in terms of its causes, the problems to be solved, and goals and measures of climate action. It would analyse where people agree, where they disagree and how meanings are negotiated. It could also systematically explore individual and societal narratives of experiences of living in communities that are faced with the threats of climate change.

Beyond a focus on the content of sense-making, it would also pay attention to sense-making processes, by exploring, for instance, how the use of linguistic resources such as metaphors, key phrases, analogies, or distinctions contribute to the shaping of meanings. For example, in the first excerpt in Box 1, the interviewee uses the metaphors of a ‘friend’ and a ‘monster’, to describe how feelings around a place, in particular with regards to the ocean, have changed from benign to insecure and threatening. The interviewee further distinguishes between different types of losses

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and damages, arguing that international policy discourse on loss and damage is too focused on the material and economic dimensions, e.g., related to the loss of property, as opposed to the non-material and non-economic dimensions, connected to e.g., loss of a sense of security and climate change becoming a mental health problem. Another, related, focus of a sense-making analysis could entail scrutinizing how experiences of climate-induced threats and losses are interpreted in analogy with, or in contrast to, historical experiences, like those mentioned in relation to previous generations in the passage above. Moreover, other ways of shaping and expressing meanings, such as through artistic expressions, could also be a focus of sense-making analysis.

Paying attention to how particular interests can be underpinned by and drive certain forms of sense-making contributes to understanding power asymmetries and inequalities in framing climate-related discourses and identifying marginalised perspectives and voices. Methodologically, sense-making analyses in the context of Pacific Island States would need to be attentive to the dialogical practices that are relevant to the communities that co-produce the research. For instance, this could mean applying a *Talanoa*-inspired conversational methodology (Feetham et al, 2022; Vaioleti, 2006) rather than standard interviews or focus groups. In the study exemplified in Box 1, after consultation with Fijian team members the interviews were conducted to better accord with the dialogical character of Talanoa principles.

While dialogical sense-making allows an analysis of the narratives, metaphors, stories, frames, and values that comprise particular discourses, critical phenomenology allows for investigations of how first-person experiences of actually-ocurring transformations involve alterations at a foundational level, in the way the world feels. Such an analysis could take its starting-point in interviewees' experiences, such as in the interviewee's account above, about the fundamental change in his relation to the ocean. In this account, the ocean seems not to appear – be experienced – as one object among many others. Instead, the account can be interpreted as exemplifying what Matther Ratcliff has termed as an "existential feeling", that is all-encompassing and pre-intentional, and where what "is felt is a changed relationship to the world as a whole, an alteration in the possibility space that one finds oneself in" (Ratcliffe 2011: 124). To exemplify further, a phenomenological analysis that engages with qualitative research could examine alterations in the ways of perceiving and experiencing the world and objects in it (e.g., the beach as no longer serene), one's experience of oneself (e.g., as someone one no longer recognizes or as someone who needs to speak and be listened to) or time (e.g., the past as lost, the future as threatening). Such analysis would have a philosophical, conceptual aim, and could contribute understanding of the fundamental changes to people's ways of being in the world that climate related change can involve. It could capture existential dimensions, and allow for a careful spelling out of the radical shifts in people's manners of experiencing themselves, others, things and their surroundings when living these climate related changes.

Further, starting in a phenomenological understanding of perception as a directedness that orients us in the world and in relation to others, and as interwoven with our ways of engaging with the world, critical phenomenology could ask how structures of power and marginalisation, and conditions of support (or lack of) structure the way people perceive and experience transformative changes. It could ask how sedimented norms about spaces and bodies – about who has access to what space and how, shape the "meaning and manner" (Guenther 2020) of risks and losses that

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such changes can entail, shaping the perception of climate change as needing urgent or less response or less urgent. Such an analysis could then serve as a basis for a critical discussion of conditions of differentiated experience and the structures of power that define such differences. In addition, critical phenomenology helps to ask questions about how climate-induced transformative experience can alter the subject's sense of self and agency when living with loss or potential loss due to climate change. These dimensions are crucial in order to understand the gravity of the changes as they occur for people as situated, embodied selves.

As seen from the above, using sense-making and critical phenomenology does not deflect attention from power relations or socio-economic structures. On the contrary, we acknowledge and emphasise their role in shaping actually-occurring transformations (Linnér and Wibeck 2019). Further, we suggest that the two approaches above are important means to understand how societal power structures ultimately can be challenged. Paying attention to whose sense-making gains traction in societal discourses would contribute to addressing power asymmetries and inequalities in framing, as well as to identifying whose perspectives voices are missing (the contribution from dialogical sense-making). Further, the analysis of how socio-cultural and historical structures and power relations, *as* structures of experience, help shape perception, experience and how we know the world, allowing for a critical discussion of their role in shaping experiences of transformative environmental change (the contribution from critical phenomenology).

Discussion

This paper argues for broadening the scope of transformations studies by paying attention to experiences and modes of making sense of actually-occurring transformations. To this end, the kinds of questions presented by the dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology approaches allow us to build on the recognition that transformative processes are complex, contingent and inter-subjective. The previous section demonstrated how we can ask different kinds of questions from combinations of these approaches.

Contrasting and comparing these approaches through reference to a common illustration of actually-occurring transformations allows us to see how they make particular contributions that are not honoured by synthesising them into a hybrid. They offer complementary means to understand actually-occurring transformations, moving away from dominant modes of making sense of transformations, which can abstract and alienate people from transformation in the search for general principles and change at higher scales. In contrast, we present two open frameworks, that allow for contextualised and culturally-specific frames and world-making practices (such as Talanoa principles) to be centred as part of analysis, rather than prescribing interpretative frameworks *a priori* to the analysis. We could use these approaches to understand how diverse kinds of actually-occurring transformative change, such as forced relocation due to climate change or decarbonisation of energy systems as part of societal response, translate into people's ways of life, and to reflect on how these situations, processes and objects are constituted in terms of meaning.

Paying attention to what people go through in actually-occurring transformations contributes to transformation studies and sets the ground for just transformations practice and policy (Masarella et al., 2021). The experience of worrying about keeping the heating on during the winter without fuel

allowance for example, may shape the way people interpret and respond to these changes, including how more 'sustainable' modes of governance shape people's sense of self and agency. We can use these approaches to question how policy prescriptions for transformation, such as cutting energy subsidies, will impact on people's ways of life. By asking how people make sense of changes, we might better account for the ambiguity of complex transformations, including unexpected responses. This can help in scientific co-production processes where reflexibility and agility are sought after (Chambers et al., 2022).

These approaches offer much that is missing in a mechanistic systems ontology, where subjectivity is positioned as superficial rather than fundamental to the constitution of systems (de la Candena and Blaser, 2018). The complementing perspectives offer a way to engage with the three spheres model of transformation (O'Brien, 2018) by drawing them together as part of relational worlding practices. We might use dialogical sense-making to understand why things matter to people and thus why things become politicised in certain ways that may not be amenable to prediction from the planetary perspective or from analysis of individuals' values, choices, or behaviours. We can turn to critical phenomenology to attend to and make visible how experiences of climate change transformation can be self- and world-transforming, and shape subjectivity in thorough ways, and critically interrogate the role of for example power relations for these experiences.

New modes of thinking and being in a changing world

Here we have drawn on two distinct but complementary approaches to thinking and living in a changing world where transformations are demanded of us and make demands on us, as differentiated selves (Berzonsky and Moser, 2017; Tsing 2017; Kaijser and Lövbrand, 2019). There are implications for both how we do research in such a world, and also how we interpret what transformations are. Drawing transformations and its constituents together shows how the practical, political and personal spheres of transformation cannot be teased apart and might be productively understood as experiential conditions that create particular modes of sense-making. Bringing together our observations of the need for new research avenues in the transformations field, and the insights from dialogical sense-making and phenomenological approaches to the study of actually-occurring transformations, we propose some directions for people-centred transformation research to explore further and in greater detail.

People are inherent constituents of change processes

Actually-occurring transformations are made sense of, experienced, and storied, expressed and grappled with within the shared unfolding of people's lives. They are ongoing intersubjective and inherently political processes, constantly challenged, resisted, negotiated by particular people, who are likewise changed by them. *Re-locating people as central to change processes* involves establishing transformative change as constituted in the relations between people as embodied and situated selves, and in relation between people and the world, where the world is not the cartesian, abstract world of quantifiable measurements, but one of multiple values, relational space and embodied subjectivity. Locating people as fundamental constituents of actually-occurring transformations means recognising how transformative change is expressed and experienced in changing situations, by situated selves embedded in transient relations, including those of power

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(Navarrete and Pelling 2015; Avelino, 2021). This requires a shift in focus from the abstract universal to the socio-cultural and materially concrete and phenomenal, i.e., to the level of meaning-making of change as it actually occurs.

Transformations involve new orientations

Larger change processes shape horizons of meaning, including within science, albeit not deterministically. The self co-produces the social, political and ecological world it experiences and makes sense of. Environmental change can imply a re-directing and re-orientating of embodied selves, though differently so for differently positioned selves (Mehta et al., 2021; Schipper et al., 2021). The phenomenological understanding of the embodied self as situated in the world and in relations with others implies an acknowledgement of *selves as always orientated* within the world; what someone perceives and how the world, things, others appear will be shaped by, e.g., the orientation towards these. Orientations matter for how we inhabit space and time, and they are intersubjectively and socially shaped: we are born into a world already shaped and inhabited by others, who make this world familiar to us, and the familiar is that which is given to us, by others, and that 'which in being given "gives" the body the capacity to be oriented in this way or in that' (Ahmed, 2006: 7). Drastic changes in one's body (such as illness) or one's world (such as climate related change) can disrupt one's previously habitual ways of engaging with the world, result in dis-orientation, and feeling of losing one's bearings. Re-orientation, phenomenologically, is about (re)finding one's way and feeling at home, gradually developing new body-world relations that (again) enable new engagements with the world.

The first point we want to make here might seem basic: objects, others, and relations can change in our estimations of them depending on our orientation towards them. As we perceive some drawing (figuratively) nearer or further away, so our concerns also shift. Further, actually-occuring transformations can be experienced as thoroughly dis-orientating, and re-orientation takes time. However, if taken seriously, the implications can be far-reaching:

Those engaged in knowledge production for and the practice of transformative change can be called upon to acknowledge new and possible orientations, to take seriously experiences of dis-orientation, and let go of modes of sense-making that no longer accord with the present conditions, acknowledging obligations to new directions that come with learning about worlds that are changing. This can be understood as an ethical call to listen to experiences of actually-occuring transformations. Indeed, in calling for situated research, Ensor et al. (2019) prompt questions like "what are the most significant changes taking place in people's lives?"

Pluralism and the potential for creative opportunities

As shown by dialogical sense-making and other qualitative research, people make sense of and respond to change in distinct and creative ways, even where they are situated in common larger political, imaginative, and physical conditions (Leventon et al., 2021b). Such pluralism creates ambiguity that can't be arrived at through external assessment (i.e. external to the experience of a particular subject) (Mehta and Harcourt, 2021). With people shaping change processes, what may seem 'obvious' and to be 'taken for granted' at a larger scale when employing a systems ontology,

becomes more uncertain, and this creates opportunities. Sense-making analysis, drawing from an understanding of dialogism, recognises that though we all experience this world differently, we are co-dependent and co-affected. In such recognition there is the potential for novelty and innovation to emerge, even in conditions of hardship, vulnerability and tension.

If perspective shifts are an essential part of sustainability transformations, as suggested by the growing literature on transformative experiences (Linnér and Wibeck, 2019), the preferences that will determine problem descriptions, goals, actions, and legitimate actors are bound to change in ways that change not only interactions within a predefined system, but the entire boundaries and rationale for the assumed systems (Turnhout et al, 2021). Research on, and for transformations may take on different orientations in order to make itself amenable to the changing conditions of subjects faced with transformative change.

CONCLUSIONS

Transformation is not an abstract concept or object, but already-happening as a contingent process located within people's lives. Transformative change is experienced in often radically-distinct ways by different people, due to power relations and other structures that shape people's perceptions, experiences and ways of knowing (Davis and Todd, 2017; Whyte, 2020). Dialogical sense-making and critical phenomenology can help attend to these dynamics, providing insights into the ways that people experience and make sense of actually-occurring transformations, and in turn shape or resist them. The latter can also attend to how socio-cultural dominant patterns of meaning including power relations can help structure these experiences.

We emphasise how important it is to understand what transformative change means to people as they are embedded and are affected by such changes. By altering our understandings of transformative change we challenge the ongoing attachments to the abstract allusions to the planetary that until recently have been replete within dominant techniques of imagining and making sense of social-environmental change. Much can be gained by comprehending transformations in terms of their contingent lived complexity rather than as mechanistic systems operating on universal principles. Such change processes are not superficially 'subjective'. Instead, the interaction of personal, political, and practical spheres of transformation within lived experience, shape how change happens in inter-subjective, relational processes laden with ambiguity and differentiated significance.

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[i] Also critical phenomenology comes in some different forms, and as an emerging sub strand, its contours are still debated (see for example Oksala 2021). The above, however, is how we understand critical phenomenology.

[ii] Phenomenological philosophy has branched out into a rich set of sub strands that include e.g., feminist, queer, and critical race approaches in phenomenology. Recently, critical phenomenology has been used as an umbrella term for these sub strands (Weiss et al 2020).