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Personal transformation in a world of crises: Insights from the experiences of protesters

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Personal transformation in a world of crises: Insights from the experiences of protesters

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Abstract

Considering that not every transformation results in equitable and sustainable outcomes, understanding transformation and how crises are experienced empirically is required to support transformations towards equity and sustainability. This research theoretically explores and empirically specifies the personal sphere of transformation, and its linkage to the political sphere. It offers a case study of protesters in a context where a polycrisis is clearly manifesting and becoming increasingly contested in the form of protests, riots, and electoral victories of radical right-wing parties: the city of the Hague, the Netherlands. This study is guided by a feminist relational approach, which derives theory from lived experiences, including those of the marginalized. Relational interviews are employed to learn through dialogue how protesters interpret the world. The research found that the protesters were witnessing, and in most cases going through, a process of 'waking up'. Their awakening resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and is part of the personal transformation they went through in response to the multiple crises manifesting in their lives. The way protesters give *meaning* to their agency once they have woken up remains diverse. How protesters act upon their personal transformation ultimately shapes the political sphere. More attention should be paid to the personal sphere of transformation, and its linkage to the political sphere, in theory and practice. Meaningful engagement with the personal sphere can open up multiple entry points for transformation towards sustainability. A feminist relational approach makes key contribution to the scholarly understanding of the personal and political spheres of transformation.

Keywords: Poly crisis • Relational paradigms • Feminist theory • Transformation • Politics of Waking Up

Main policy recommendation

Considering that not every transformation results in equitable and sustainable outcomes, understanding transformation and how crises are experienced empirically is required for transformation towards equity and sustainability. More attention should be paid to the personal sphere of transformation, and particularly its linkage to the political sphere. Meaningful engagement with the personal sphere can open up multiple entry points for transformation towards sustainability. A feminist relational approach makes key contribution to the scholarly understanding of the personal and political spheres of transformation. This approach is based on a relational understanding of reality and derives theory from lived experiences, including those of the marginalized.

Background

Multiple crises are not distinct challenges but are interconnected and interdependent, forming one **polycrisis** instead. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, was likely to happen and is highly likely to happen again with current land use change, biodiversity loss, climate change, international trade, and human mobility (Tollefson, 2020). The pandemic, in turn, exacerbated other ongoing crises, such as growing inequality, political polarization, the mental health crisis, domestic violence, and intensified socio-political unrest. At the root is a **crisis of perception**; science and society strongly adhere to a mechanistic, reductionist and linear view in **a relational, complex and nonlinear world** (Ainscough et al., 2021; Capra & Luisi, 2014).

The associated risks of the pandemic were unevenly distributed. Many governance responses to contain the virus perpetuated or even deepened inequities (Schipper et al., 2020). However, no one could escape the pandemic. The pandemic acted as a mirror, revealing our true nature: *we are **being(s)-in-relationships** in an interconnected and interdependent world* (Burkitt, 2008; Pettersen, 2021; Schlitz et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2021; West et al., 2020). On a philosophical level, it showed how we are not the same, and certainly not equal, yet also not just different (Nasr, 2021). Sustainability action that emerges from a space of **oneness** has the potential to counter today's polarization (Eriksen, 2022; Sharma, 2017; Wilkerson, 2023).

The **conventional problem-solving approach** renders complex problems into technical issues that can be managed under orderly control within existing frameworks of thought and action. This approach fails to *simultaneously* 1) solve immediate problems, 2) shift disempowering systems and cultural norms, 3) while generating new patterns and new formations based on values for everyone, everywhere (O'Brien et al., 2023; Sharma, 2017). Techno-managerial transitions are not necessarily wrong, but rather partial and therefore limiting. **In a polycrisis, transformation(s) to sustainability is urgent.** Transformation relates to a particular depth of change.

Transformation involves changes across interconnected sphere (see Figure 1). The practical sphere represents technical and behavioral elements, such as consumer choices. The political sphere represents systems and structures, such as NGOs and social movements. The personal sphere includes individual and collective beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms. The personal sphere matters because how we think shapes how we act (Leichenko, & O'Brien, 2019).

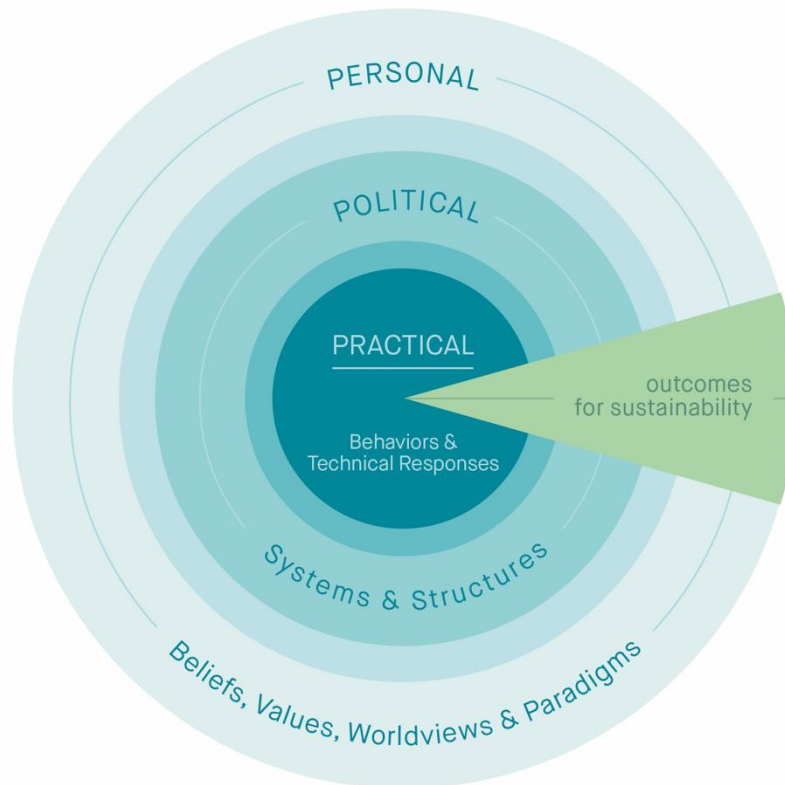


Figure 1 Three spheres of transformation (O'Brien & Sygna, 2013; based on Sharma, 2007)

The personal sphere, and its linkages to the political sphere, remains understudied and often overlooked in policy and planning processes (Bristow et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2020). Little research has specified transformation empirically (Fazey et al., 2018).

Research

This research **theoretically explores and empirically specifies the personal sphere of transformation**, and in particular how **the personal and political spheres are linked**. It offers a **case study** of protesters in a context where a polycrisis is clearly manifesting and becoming increasingly contested in the form of protest and riots: the city of the Hague, the Netherlands. **Protests expose exclusion and injustice**, and therefore bring the personal-political to the fore.

The Netherlands deals with a **multitude of crises**, such as a biodiversity crisis, persistent poverty and inequality, the Childcare Benefit Scandal, the nitrogen crisis, and a housing crisis. There is decreasing institutional trust, emerging electoral divisions, and further fragmentation of the political landscape. Freedom of speech is increasingly under pressure, with more aggression and intimidation directed towards civil society actors, such as journalists. The radical right-wing, nationalist, and populist **Party for Freedom (PVV)**, led by the only member of the party Geert Wilders, became the biggest party during the 2023 national elections. The party received 37 of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives.

The Hague is one of the most **segregated and unequal** city in the Netherlands (Gemeente Den Haag, 2020). The political spectrum of the Hague is **polarizing and fragmenting**. It took the political parties half a year to form a coalition after the local elections in 2022 (ANP, 2022). In 2021, the number of **protests** in the four largest cities in the Netherlands almost doubled compared to five years before (de Kluis, 2021). The Hague has been and continues to be the protest capital of the Netherlands, with around 1700 reported protests in 2021 and around 2000 reported protests the year after. The nature of the protests is becoming rougher and increasingly characterized by an either for-or-against logic.

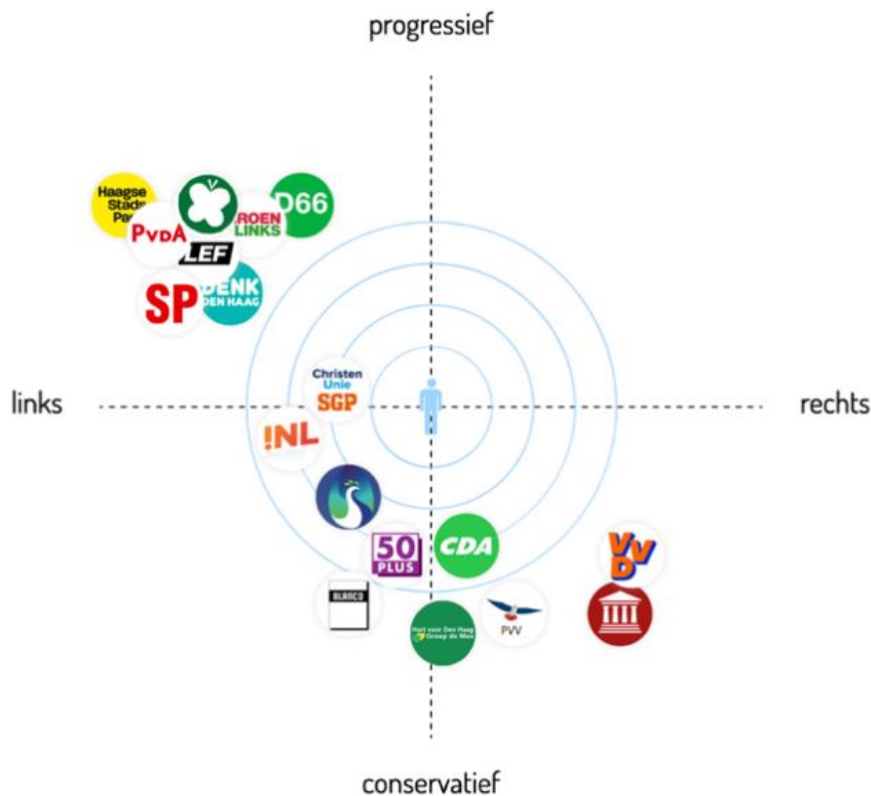


Figure 2 The political parties that ran in the 2022 local elections in the Hague positioned on the left-right, progressive-conservative axes of the political spectrum (Kieskompas, 2022)

Qualitative interviews were used to study the experiences of protesters. **Relational interviews** were employed to learn through dialogue how participants interpret the world (Brinkmann, 2013; Fujii, 2018). Seven relational interviews were conducted with protesters between January and May 2022. The interviews shed light on the **positional differences** of the protesters, and their motivations to protest. Most of the protesters identified as progressive, highly educated, and she/her.

The research was guided by a methodological commitment to practice feminist theory during the entire research process (Ackerly & True, 2020; Sultana, 2017). A **feminist relational approach** that theorizes from lived experiences was identified as appropriate to the study of the personal sphere of transformation, and its linkage with the political sphere. The approach was operationalized through relationality, contextuality, interdisciplinarity, and reflexivity.

Protests	Vocation	Age	Gender	Relationship
BLM	Civic studies and math teacher	33	W	Friend
Solidarity with Palestine	Social worker	36	W	Friend
Extinction Rebellion	Unemployed	64	W	Stranger
BLM, Anti-racism, Climate Action	Council woman and social worker	44	W	Stranger
BLM, Anti-racism, Climate Action, Animal rights, Pride, Housing Rights, Solidarity with Ukraine	Party officer and party chairman	35	W	Stranger
Anti-corona measures	Sociotherapists	65	M	Stranger
BLM	Internationalization officer	33	W	Acquaintance

Table 1 Background information about the participants

Findings

The research found that the protesters were witnessing, and in most cases going through, a **shared but nevertheless differentiated process of ‘waking up’**. Their awakening resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and is part of the personal transformation they went through in response to the multiple crises manifesting in their lives. Ways in which a sense of ‘awakening’ was present in the lived experiences expressed by the protesters were identified. First, an awakening to who they are, protesters expressed a significant change in how they identified themselves. Second, an awakening to why their lives are the way they are, protesters expressed a significant change of how they make sense of society. Third, an awakening to how their lives could be, protesters expressed a significant change in their thinking around what the future might look like. Most experiences consisted of multiple ways of waking up. The vignettes of Thijs and Bethany on the next page illustrate an awakening to who they are.

Although their goals differ in many ways, the underlying processes underpinning Thijs and Bethany’s motivation to protests are similar. Typical of the polarized contexts that they are finding themselves in, their identity change was extreme and rapid. Both expressed a similar sense of awakening to who they really are, followed by an attempt to disrupt the status-quo. The awakening that the protesters are witnessing, and in most cases going through, could be interpreted as a personal transformation brought about by multiple and converging crises. The transformation of their **inner worlds** is linked to the transformation of their **outer world**. *They woke up in a world of crises*. This resonates with Fazey et al.’s (2018) finding that changes in *how* people know and *who* they understand themselves to be often emerges during crisis. The way protesters give *meaning* to their **agency** once they have woken up remains diverse. How protesters act upon their personal transformation ultimately shapes the political sphere. Considering the number of protests, riots, and electoral victories of radical right-wing parties, **the politics of waking up** seems to become a key feature of the political sphere (Adnan, 2021).

Vignette 1: Thijs

Thijs has *“an increasing tendency to vote for the right while [he is] originally all the way from the left”*. Within only a couple of months, he stopped thinking about the pandemic as a very serious problem and instead started to wonder whether it *“was consciously created to see how long they can manage to suppress citizens”*. Thijs suffered from the lockdowns and found it awful to see how societal polarization manifested in his personal network. He suddenly imagined himself getting things done through violence, clearly departing from his initial harmonious standpoint as a sociotherapist in a Forensic psychiatric center. He *“never used to think about people or the government like that. That anger towards the government just got so much grip on”* him. Adnan (2021) argues that the huge wave of conspiracy theories is symptomatic for *“a generation who trie[s] to wrestle their cognitive power back from the elite institutions without really knowing what to do with it”* (p. 34). The transformation of Thijs' identity could be said to largely stem from his negative encounters with the political regime. His disappointment when nothing got done with his plan to address homelessness, as well as the Childcare Benefit Scandal, made him lose much trust in the Dutch government. He experiences *“the Netherlands as a civilized country with a human face and all kinds of social provisions”* to be a fairytale. Thijs woke up to a politics of manipulation and empty promises, and consequently started identifying himself as a *“dissenting voice”*.

Vignette 2: Bethany

Similarly, Bethany underwent rapid identity change in a relatively short amount of time. Her discovery of the urgency and magnitude of global environmental change disrupted her initial worldview, forcing her to question who she is and how to live her life. When she learned about the greenwashing of the fossil fuel industry, she felt so angry and lied to. Bethany took the initiative to educate herself about the climate and nature crises. *“So once [she] grasped the magnitude of the problem, [she] was absolutely terrified! [She] knew something that other people did not and [she] had no idea of what to do with that”*. She decided to become an environmentalist. In little time, her identity transformed from a 'good solid trustworthy lady with integrity' to a 'lawbreaking activist'. This was not easy. She *“found it extremely hard to go out and get arrested. [She is] doing things that [she] would never have thought of doing fifteen years ago. [She] would have never gotten in trouble WITH THE LAW. It was not in [her] DNA. [...] It took [her] a while before [she] could feel comfortable with what [she] was doing”*. Bethany woke up to a politics of manipulation and greenwashing, and consequently started identifying herself as an environmental activist.

Conclusion

The research findings support the literature that emphasizes **the role of personal transformation in times of multiple crises** (Adnan, 2021; Schlitz et al., 2010; Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019, to cite but a few). Besides confirming that personal transformation matters, this research shows *how* personal transformation comes to matter in a context of turbulence. Rather than only focusing on *what* protesters wake up to, the research points to the importance of *how* protesters give meaning to their agency once they have woken up.

The finding that ***personal transformation in a world of crises comes to matter through the practices that derive from it*** has important implications for the field of transformation. Within the context of an increasing number of protests, riots, and electoral victories of radical right-wing parties, future research can explore how a shared, yet differentiated sense of awakening shapes how people choose to act. Deepening the empirical understanding of transformation as it unfolds is a prerequisite for deliberate transformation towards equity and sustainability.

Emergent recommendations

- The personal sphere of transformation, and its linkage to the political sphere, deserves significantly more attention in theory and practice. How we think about the world (ourselves included) ultimately shapes how we act in it. Meaningful engagement with the personal sphere can open up a multitude of entry points for transformation(s) towards sustainability.
- A feminist relational approach suits the study of the personal sphere of transformation, and its linkage with the political sphere. This approach can capture the lived experience of transformation. The humanization of transformation can counter polarization. A feminist relational approach can transform the social sciences and the world social scientists study.
- Transformation of the prevailing mechanistic, reductionist and linear worldview of separation is needed to counter polarization, and instead generate new patterns and formations based on values for everyone, everywhere (O'Brien et al., 2023; Sharma, 2017). Sustainability action should derive from a space of oneness if it is to achieve equitable and enduring change.
- The recommendations above will be more easily put into practice if they are linked with broader changes at home, at work, and in society at large. Doing things differently should be normalized and the confusion that emerges with unlearning and new learning fully embraced. Individuals and collectives can use their socially differentiated opportunities to be courageous and (re-)connect with themselves, others, and nature in more profound, compassionate ways (Bristow et al., 2022; Eriksen, 2022; Ives et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2023; Sharma, 2017; Wilkerson, 2023).

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