

# REFLECTING ON URBAN ENGAGED RESEARCH PRACTICES

Workshop

Brecht Van der Schueren



Doctoral Seminars on Sustainability Research in the Built Environment

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[perspective.brussels](https://perspective.brussels)

# VUB CERL team



Doctoral Schools training  
**Skills And Instruments For Successful  
Transdisciplinary and Participatory  
Research Projects**



Advanced Seminar in Urban Studies  
**Mapping the Usquare Neighbourhood**

Partnerships with organisations in Brussels  
**Brussels 2030 Cultural Capital**



# Community Engaged Research and Learning at VUB

Processes of **knowledge creation and sharing** where **academic and extra-academic** actors collaborate around **socio-ecological challenges** and contribute to **positive change** both individually and collectively.

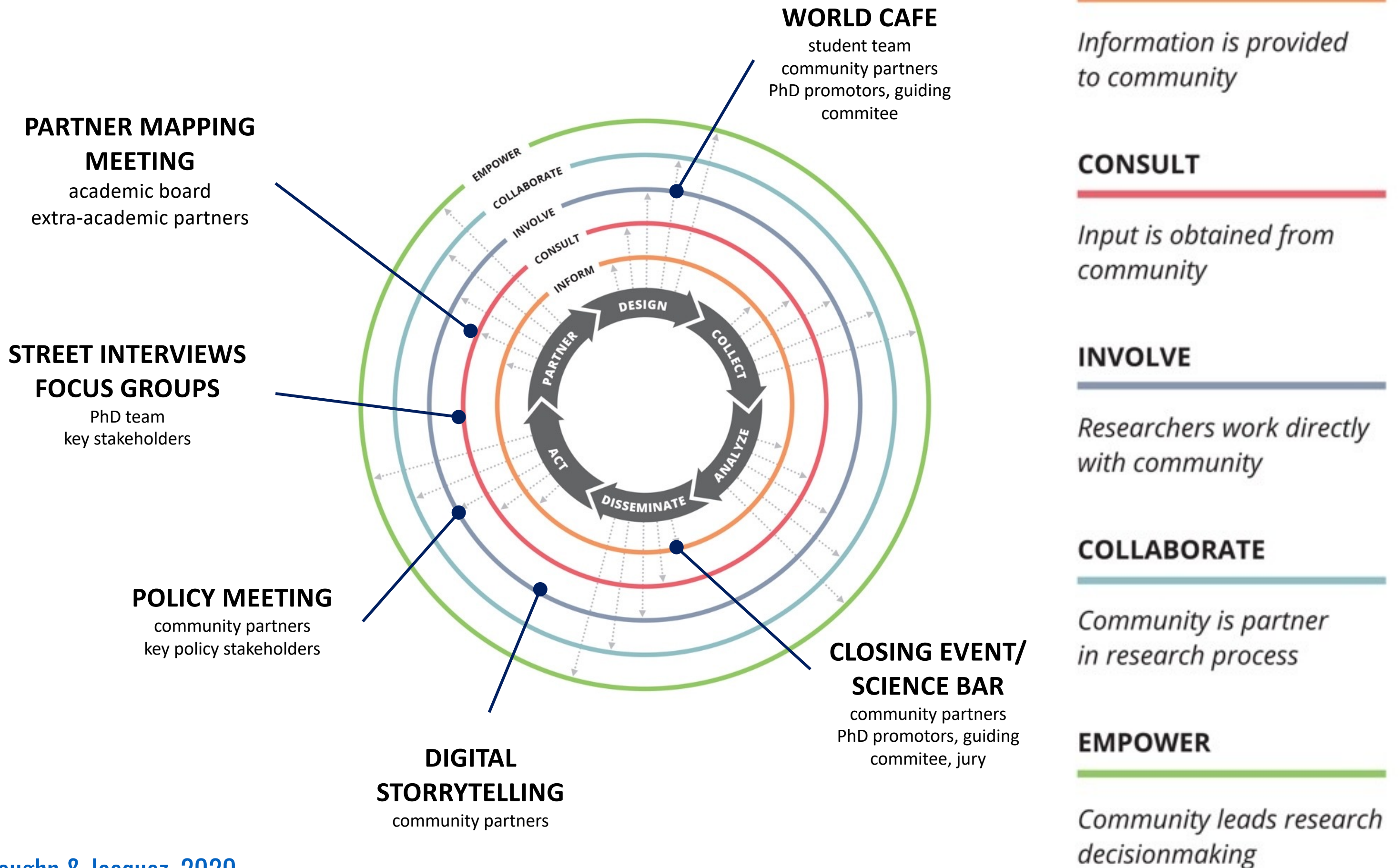
Working definition

Ambitions of this session?

**Challenge you to think creatively and critically about your current research practices and how you engage or collaborate with colleagues, stakeholders, ...**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Reflection on GROUP DYNAMICS**
- 3. Reflection on LANGUAGE & POSITIONALITY**
- 4. Reflection on WORLDVIEWS, POWER PLAYS & PARADIGMS**
- 5. Take aways?**

# Participation is never out of reach // too late



## INFORM

*Information is provided to community*

## CONSULT

*Input is obtained from community*

## INVOLVE

*Researchers work directly with community*

## COLLABORATE

*Community is partner in research process*

## EMPOWER

*Community leads research decisionmaking*

**“While the core of a practice is a locus of expertise, radically new insights and developments often arise at the boundaries between communities.”**

**Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002:153**

**“There is something disquieting, humbling at times, yet exciting and attractive about such close encounters with the unknown, with the mystery of ‘otherness’: a chance to explore the edge of your competence, learn something entirely new, revisit your little truths, and perhaps expand your horizon.”**

Wenger, 2020



**“Boundary practices require participants to enter unfamiliar territories where they may find themselves underqualified or under equipped.”**

**Akkerman & Bakker, 2011:143**

1. Introduction (5 min)
- 2. Reflection on GROUP DYNAMICS (25 min)**
3. Reflection on LANGUAGE & POSITIONALITY (25 min)
4. Reflection on WORLDVIEWS, POWER PLAYS & PARADIGMS (25min)
5. Take aways? (10min)

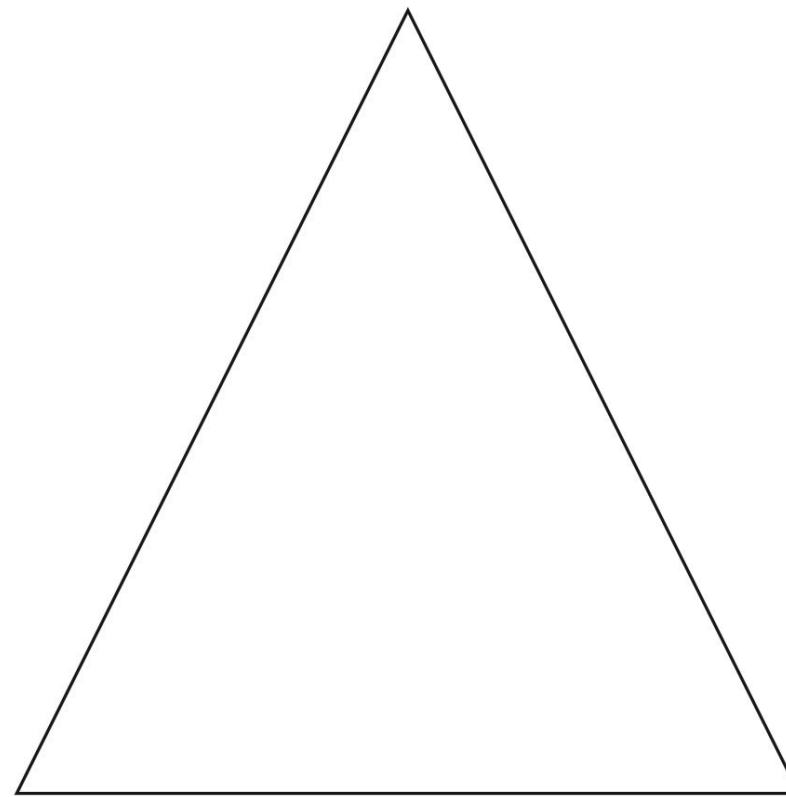
# **DRAW AN ANIMAL**

- **no communication**
- **only straight lines**
- **one line at a time**
- **pass on to the person to your right**

Goal oriented  
Working toward clear results  
Quality/quantity of what is achieved matters

"The end justifies the means"  
"Rules are optional, they can be broken if necessary"

## PRODUCT



## PROCESS

Taking care for each other  
Focus on human relations  
Being comprehensive & empathic

"Everything's fine as long as we have  
fun or get along well"

## PROCEDURE

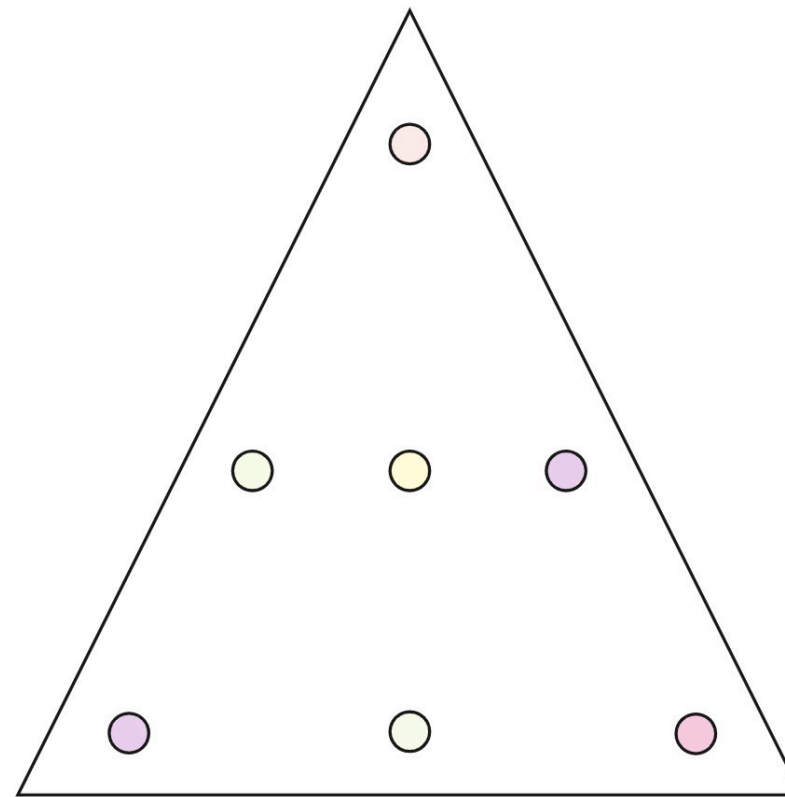
Focus on rules and formalities  
Aware of time-management  
(strict) division of roles & responsibilities  
Strategizing & planning and sticking to it

"The rules are the rules"  
"that's not what we've agreed upon earlier"

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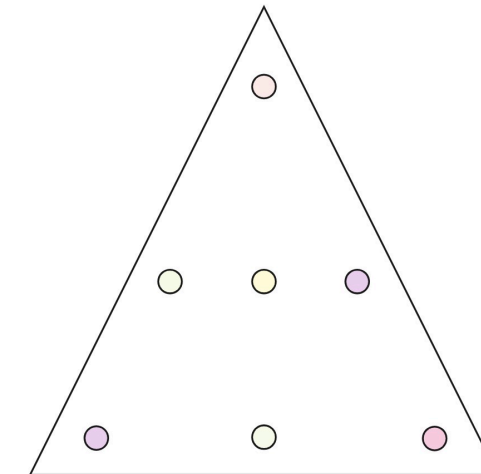
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# DRAW AN ANIMAL – 2.0

- no communication
- only straight lines
- one line at a time
- pass on to the person to your right

- Position yourself somewhere on the Process Procedure Product triangle
- Execute the exercise from this position (go all the way!)

1. Introduction
2. Reflection on GROUP DYNAMICS
- 3. Reflection on LANGUAGE & POSITIONALITY**
4. Reflection on WORLDVIEWS, POWER PLAYS & PARADIGMS
5. Take aways?

The conceptual “fuzziness” around the term “sustainability” results in the formation of an illusory consensus around its meaning, shielding it from direct interrogation by voters or other stakeholders. This idea refers to sustainability as an “empty signifier,” and in the context of urban planning, unifies diverse stakeholders within the planning process under the pretense that they are working towards the same “sustainability”. Such fuzzy narratives can result in “constructive ambiguity,” gathering many stakeholders behind the same broad visions, yet with many different interpretations. As such, sustainability’s arbitrariness limits its action guiding power, preventing anything concrete from being done.

Paraphrased from:  
Ball, Bandemer, Hartig & Paulsen  
Research report: Mapping Sustainability Perceptions in the Usquare  
(2023)



**WHAT ARE “FUZZY” CONCEPTS THAT YOU  
OFTEN USE, WHEN WRITING OR TALKING  
ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH?**

### Simple words given new meaning by architects:

- Concept
- Space
- Fabric (urban or building)
- Metaphor
- Legibility (of something other than writing)
- Dimension (meaning a characteristic of some)
- Moment
- Celebrate
- Negotiate
- Dynamic
- Language
- Context
- Gesture
- Proud (“the countertop is proud of the cabine
- Taxonomy
- Hierarchy
- Scale
- Section
- Formal
- Nodes

### Architecture-specific jargon:

- Pastiche
- Sustainability
- Ergonomy
- Genius loci
- Facade
- Charette
- Regionalism
- Threshold
- Massing
- Enfilade
- Materiality
- Poché
- Post-industrial
- Diagrammatic
- Vernacular
- Modular
- Deconstruction
- Typology
- Parametric

### Obscure words that architects overuse (or misuse):

- Iconic
- Organic
- Dichotomy
- Eclectic
- Kitsch
- Sequence
- Stasis
- Interstitial / Interstice
- Iteration
- Juxtapose/Juxtaposition
- Stereotomic
- Tectonics (and architectonics)
- Liminal
- Articulate
- Ephemeral
- Domesticity
- Anthropogenic
- Regenerate
- Hybrid
- Generative



# How do you talk about your research? How do you listen to others?

**PERSON A**

“What fascinates me about my own research is ...”

**PERSON B**

Active listening

=

No questions

No interruptions

No suggestions

**3 minutes – then switch**

# How do you talk about your research? How do you listen to others?

## PERSON A

“People with a **completely different worldview or opinion** might talk about my research topic as ...”

## PERSON B

Active listening  
=  
No questions  
No interruptions  
No suggestions

**3 minutes – then switch**

# How do you talk about your research? How do you listen to others?

## PERSON A

“A **non-human actor** might talk about my research topic as ...”

## PERSON B

Active listening

=

No questions

No interruptions

No suggestions

**3 minutes – then switch**

1. Introduction
2. Reflection on GROUP DYNAMICS
3. Reflection on LANGUAGE & POSITIONALITY
4. **Reflection on WORLDVIEWS, POWER PLAYS & PARADIGMS**
5. Take aways?

# Questions to navigate in engaged research

1. how to conduct dialogical research based on the idea of equality, within the non-dialogical and hierarchical cultural and institutional environment?
2. how to invite and involve those in power into activities which expose domination and seek ways to reduce it?
3. how to be a genuine partner to a 'community' and simultaneously to adopt a critical stance that presupposes the definition of their problem?

# Looking at tensions through the lens of Participatory Action Research

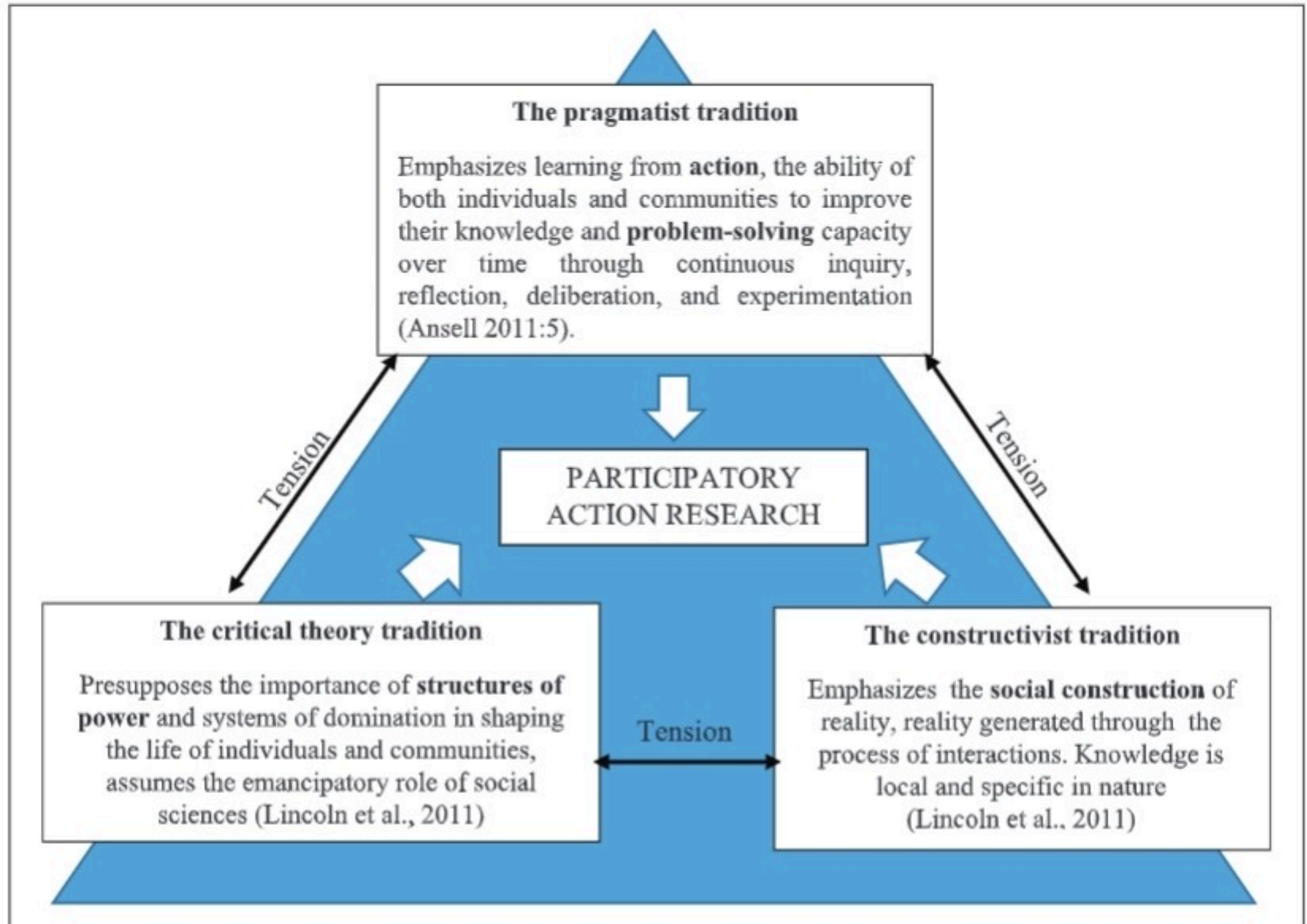


Figure 1. Meta-theoretical approaches present in PAR.



“So, Participatory Action Research (PAR) treats the ‘researched’ community as experts on their own experiences (constructivist perspective) and simultaneously presupposes that relations of domination are an important part of that experience (critical perspective). Thus, the critical theory perspective endangers the goals set by the constructivist perspective and vice versa.

PAR’s orientation toward action (Pragmatism) requires agreement on working within power structures and making use of the same power structures that it tries to challenge. This creates a serious risk of reinforcing the status quo or at least requires some form of compromise with it (endangering goals set by the critical theory perspective).

PAR’s orientation toward exploring local knowledge through communication (constructivism) and toward problem solving (pragmatism) makes it prone to overlook the political nature of the cultural, institutional, and social environment within which inquiry takes place and by which all inquiry is infiltrated (strongly highlighted by critical theory approach).

The constructivist and pragmatist orientations also make the researcher prone to assume that ‘the community’ is a monolith, just because as a whole it is producing common meanings and have some common problems to be solved. These tendencies go against the critical perspective, whose basic assumption is that relations of domination are universal and cannot be organized out of society.

Hence, a consistent researcher is exposed to the ethical risks of either paternalism (critical theory), relativism, and therefore paralysis (constructivism), or opportunism (Pragmatism).”

# Navigating tensions by “cultivating a flexible repertoire of responses balancing pragmatist, critical and constructivist traditions”

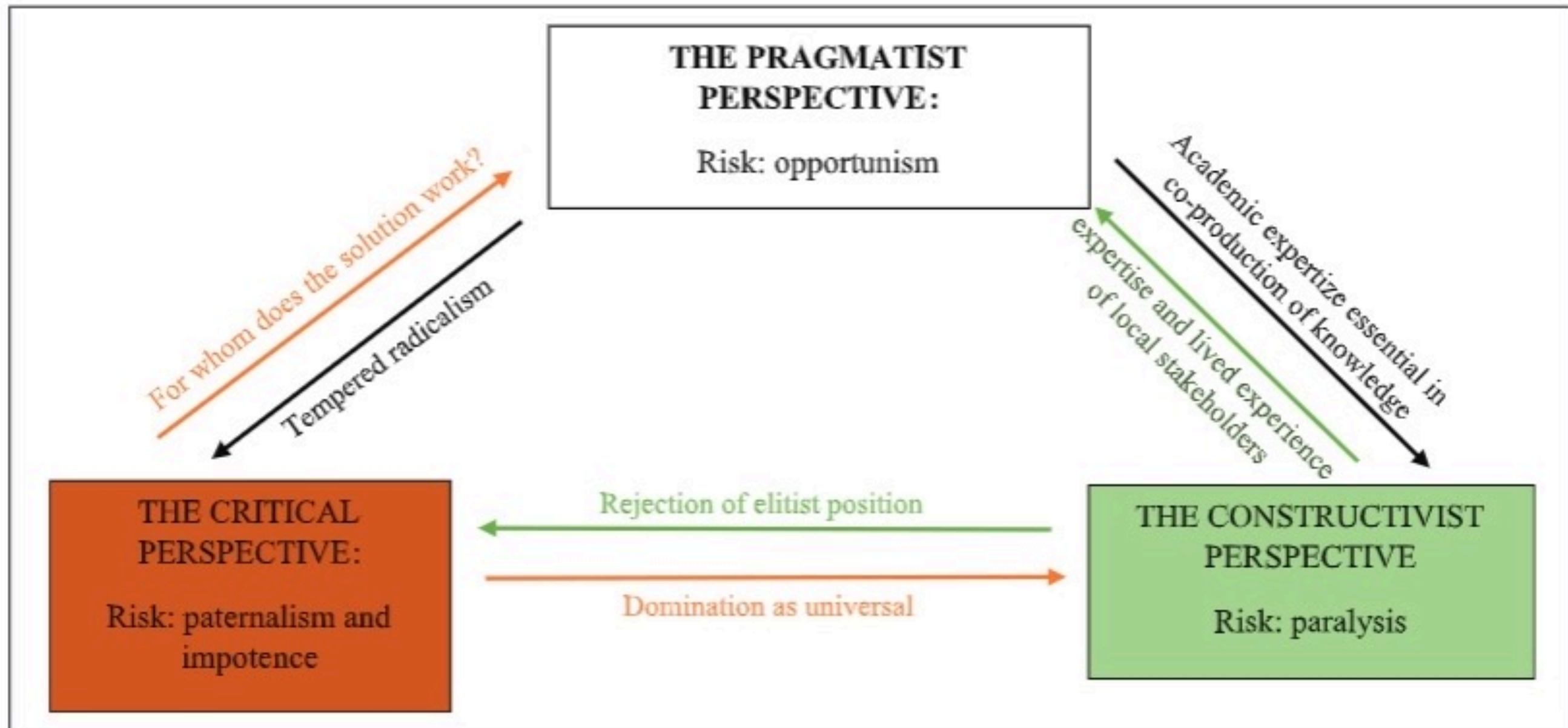


Figure 2. Navigating between perspectives.

**“Putting it simply, critically oriented approaches should be **critical** in aspiration, **pragmatic** in practice, and **constructive** in its understanding of self, context and tasks.”**

**Struminska-Kutra, 2016:17**

# From academic to political rigour: Insights from the 'Tarot' of transgressive research

Leah Tempera, Dylan McGarry, Lena Weber

[Ecological Economics 164 \(2019\)](#)

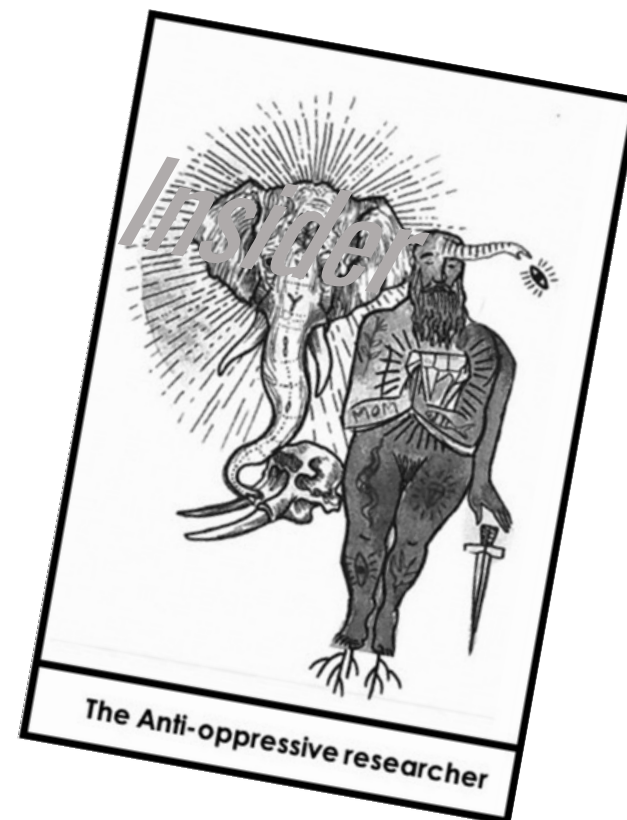
*Community insider*



*Outsider*



*Change agent*



*Critical friend*

“This paper [...] arises from our experiences of having to transgress typical roles and responsibilities of researchers in the academy, where the concerns, needs, tensions and issues we are working with, as well as our personal contexts, demand counter-hegemonic approaches.

At the same time, some of our peers (often bound by bureaucratic, Cartesian and positivist orthodoxies) sometimes struggle to support us as early career researchers working on these issues.

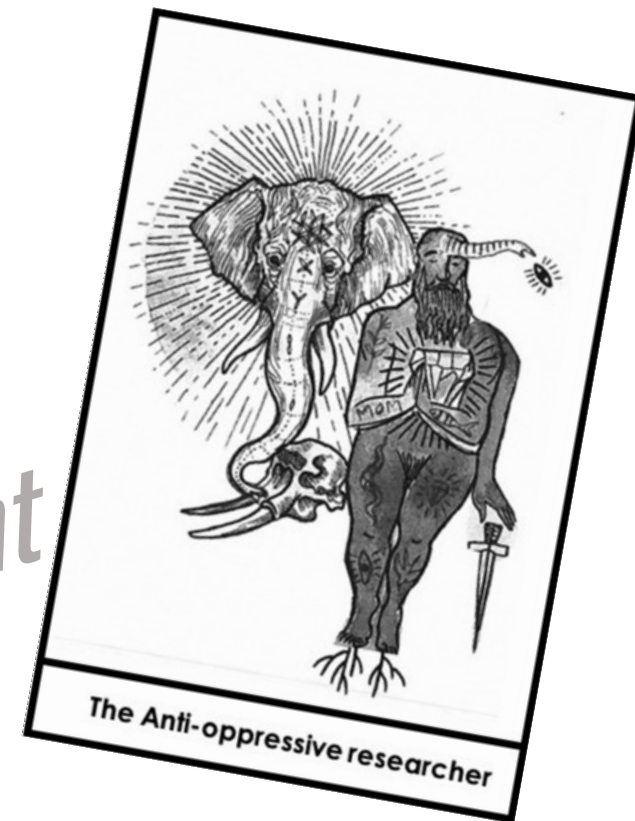
We are also inspired by the errors we have made, the struggle of dealing with the imperfectness of working with ‘wicked problems’ (a term Rittel and Webber (1973) used to describe the complexity of social and environmental problems which could not be solved by purely scientific-rational approaches.) that are in a constant state of flux;

as well as what is emerging from our research community: we see our peers grappling with similar struggles and having to navigate these issues in a similar way, and so this paper has emerged as a way to acknowledge these struggles and open up communal reflexivity.”



- What character or role do you identify with in your research up to this point?
- What images surface when you think of your work?
- What challenges and tensions come into play when you adopt this role?

*Change agent*



# Who am I in relation to my participants/partners and my setting?

*Community insider*



*Insider*

*Outsider*

*Critical friend*



1. **Accessibility** (research can be understood broadly and a means for social learning)
2. **Reflexivity** (critically examination of our own practices, presumptions and assumptions and the power relationships in our work).
3. **Relevance** (co-defining Matter of Concern with all involved. Research must be useful to emancipatory efforts of groups we work with)
4. **Transparency** (clarity of structure, processes and outcome)
5. **Care-full ness** (relations of care with oneself, loved ones, communities of scholar and participants)
6. **Respectfulness** (how are other forms of knowledge and worldviews valorized, recognized and integrated into the research process)
7. **Relationality** (research should be grounded and context dependent)
8. **Reciprocity** (co-design of research question, methods, analysis and outputs works as one method to help ensure reciprocity)
9. **Fallibility** (possibility to fail and learn from failure)
10. **Transformativity/Transgression** (how is the research transforming power relations and transgressing practice as usual to open up new emancipatory possibilities).

Do you want to contribute to making a more democratic, green, inclusive and caring Brussels, with culture at its heart?



## Brussels2030 Summer Assembly

**What?** Workshops, walks, site visits, key-notes, discussions, networking, ...

**When?** 28.06.23-02.07.23

**Where?** LesHalles (Schaerbeek) and beyond

**Inscriptions:** <https://brussels2030.be/join-the-brussels2030-summer-assembly-2023/>



**Merci!**

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