# Relational approaches to designing social innovation: insights from Europe and Asia Pacific contexts

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# Abstract

This qualitative investigation explores different dynamics of interpersonal relationships in processes of designing social innovation (DSI). Combining practice-led research in Italy and online with insights from practitioners working in different contexts in the Asia Pacific region, it nuances the understanding of relationships and their significance for DSI processes.

This research uses Kasulis's *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002) as a lens to observe both the researcher's experience and that of practitioners working in different contexts and cultures. Reflexive thematic analysis is used to analyse the practitioners' insights, while specific dynamics in the researcher's practice are explored through reflective practice, dialogue and relationship with colleagues and collaborators, leading to the identification of three themes. These are organised in a Framework for Relational Literacy.

The first theme highlights the importance of building a system of reciprocity between those involved in a DSI initiative. The concept of reciprocity is explored through the identification of different dynamics of generosity in DSI initiatives, their benefits, and the risks connected to them. The second theme explores the establishment and maintenance of mutuality in relationships through core features of mutual trust and psychological safety; mutual respect and mutual learning; role-taking and power dynamics. The third theme nuances the construction of a shared relational identity in DSI processes. It examines tensions and overlaps between preserving individuality and prioritising reciprocal attunement, and discusses their influence on the designers' identity in DSI processes.

The research findings depict designing social innovation as an intricate and complex process. They question solutions-focused, design-centric approaches to social innovation and problematise the emphasis on methods and tactics over relationships, as it can marginalise or erase contextual specificities and the political dimension of designing social innovation. This study supports practitioners in their transition towards intimate and relational ways of understanding, doing, and accounting for DSI processes, enabling DSI theory and practice to welcome a stronger plurality.

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# Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas, and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted through the Researcher's submission to Northumbria University's Ethics Online System on 15/03/2019 (interviews); 30/08/2019 (fieldwork); 08/02/2021 (data validation).

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 69086 words.

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# Section One: Research set-up

The first section of this thesis lays the groundwork of this doctoral inquiry through three chapters: an introduction, a review of literature, and a detailed description of the methodology adopted for this research.

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis, explains what motivated me to undertake this study and clarifies its aims and objectives. It also outlines the thesis and the main points for each chapter. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to this research – particularly on designing social innovation – from a relational perspective. Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach for this study, including the epistemological and ontological perspectives that guided the inquiry and the research methods that were used to gather and analyse the data.

# Chapter 1. Introduction

From November 2017 to May 2018, I collaborated with an Indonesia-based organisation on a series of public space projects funded by the United Nations. I was based in the organisation's offices in Jakarta, with the role of Public Space Assistant. This six-month collaboration followed studies in architecture, urban design, and management for local development, as I intended to advance my professional practice as a designer and facilitator in Italy, my country of origin, through work experience in an international cooperation organisation.

The collaboration included six weeks of travel around the island of Java following my manager, an architect specialising in Participatory Design, to several meetings with stakeholders of various kinds, from villagers to high-ranking government officials. In a context where most public space projects are the result of top-down decisions, a multistakeholder approach welcoming bottom-up contribution to the design of public space was considered innovative; the designer acted as a facilitator, introducing new procedures, and guiding the stakeholders through the process. Most meetings were held in the local language; immersed in an unfamiliar context with little opportunity for active contribution, I observed the care my manager put in nurturing relationships. I felt he was considerably skilled in generating positive contributions and reactions from different kinds of people. In the long journeys between site visits, he often mentioned the importance of "making friends" during these trips, referring to the strengthening of relationships with the stakeholders. We visited numerous colleagues and "mentors" (so he defined them) and in these meetings, he would introduce me as his assistant and his friend. We even paid a visit to a project completed in previous years, where I observed that the residents of the neighbourhood would greet him on the street as he was showing me around, demonstrating that he still had strong links to the people long after the project had ended.

These connections seemed to enable design to happen, they sustained the social innovation process, were cultivated long before the start of the project and long after its completion. Designing social innovation (DSI) appeared as a deeply relational practice; however, the variety of frameworks, toolkits, and models I was exposed to during my education and training made little to no mention of the complexity of relationships and of their intersections with DSI. When the opportunity arose to undertake a doctoral inquiry on similar issues, I was immediately intrigued. I have been fortunate enough to be given this opportunity; this thesis constitutes my contribution to the exploration of personal relationships in designing social innovation initiatives.

## 1.1 Background

Initiatives at the intersection of design and social innovation range from small, grassroots community projects, to large-scale government programmes. Most published accounts of these initiatives are either based on academic research or come from reports commissioned by the funders of the initiatives; also, many initiatives operate independently from institutions, and often go unreported. When consistent reporting does exist, little space is given to the daily 'ins and outs' and details of designing social innovation (DSI), and particularly to the intricacies of relationships and their significance for DSI work; instead, there appears to be a focus on strategies, methods, tools, techniques. Often, these originate from the West (Akama & Yee, 2016) and operate with a Western cultural perspective and its specific assumptions; moreover, even when relationships are reported on, they too are often considered from a Western standpoint, so that our view on relationships in DSI is partial and incomplete. It is critical that the understandings and perspectives of practitioners working in non-Western contexts are acknowledged, documented, and shared with the larger DSI community, as they can provide significant knowledge to improve how we address social issues and how we practise design. For this reason, this research examines data from a diverse range of contexts, aiming to widen the perspective on designing social innovation.

## 1.2 Aims, objectives and research questions

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which relationships and relationality are considered when designing in the context of social innovation initiatives. The goal is to contribute to (re)defining the designer's position (my position) within an emerging field of design study and practice that has a social, relational, and communal core. The research explores what role relationships and relationality have in processes of designing social innovation (DSI), what are their attributes, and what impact or effect they have on the design process (and vice versa). It also discusses challenges and limitations to DSI practices that foreground relationships. The research draws from my practice in three different contexts (two in Italy, and one online with international participants), informed by experiences and examples from the Asia Pacific region, seeking to enrich the discourse around DSI by welcoming a variety of perspectives and cultural nuances while surfacing attitudes and values that may be assumed as universal in design practice.

The research investigates the following questions and pursues related objectives, as follows:

*Table 1.1 Research questions and objectives*

| **Research questions** | **Research objectives** |
|---|---|
| • How are relationships and relationality considered in social innovation?<br>• How are they defined, described, and theorised?<br>• How does a design approach enable specific aspects of relationality to surface?<br>• How do we develop a design approach that foregrounds relationality? | • Nuance definitions of 'foregrounding relationships' and 'relational practice' in designing social innovation<br>• Identify challenges, limitations, constraints to relational DSI practice<br>• Examine specific relational dynamics in DSI<br>• Investigate how a design approach enables specific aspects of relationality to surface<br>• Discuss how a design approach that foregrounds relationality can be developed |

## 1.3 My standpoint

Since this research is centred on my practice and reflects upon my position, as a designer, in the field of designing social innovation as I explore relationships and relationality, I start by describing my standpoint and orientation, mindful of the experiences and relationships that have shaped my approach to design. I do this in accordance with feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), which argues that knowledge stems from social position and is grounded in the knower's distinctive embodied experiences.

I was born in the early 1990s in Milan, Italy, and grew up in a medium-sized town in the North of Italy. My mother is Italian; my father was of Italian, Romanian, and Jewish descent; I am raced white. I was raised in a middle-class, highly educated, atheist family, and encouraged to have what my father would have described as a healthy dose of scepticism and disobedience towards institutional power. Both my parents are psychiatrists and psychoanalysts; through their education, first, and then through my own analysis, I developed an awareness of my emotions and a willingness to explore experiences through relationships and dialogue.

After high school, I moved to Milan to attend Architecture school in Politecnico di Milano. Here, I became interested in urbanism and its intersection with various social issues. To explore this interest, right after my graduation I volunteered with a social cooperative working in social housing estates in a deprived area of Milan.

I first came across instances where design was used to support social innovation during my MSc in Urban Design and City Planning at the Bartlett (UCL): my final research project in Urban Design, *Genuine Regeneration*, focused on the relationship between social housing residents and the designers in charge of intervening on social housing estates, reviewing top-down and bottom-up design processes and examining issues of power. My relationship with a group of activists and social housing residents campaigning against housing estate demolitions was fundamental: I developed my political perspective on design, as well as friendships and a sense of community which I longed for during my time in London. At the same time, my direct relationships with activists and residents meant I often was confronted with issues of class inequality; at times, I felt out of place, with my middle-class background and my secure housing situation.

Right before graduation, I started working for an organisation dedicated to improving healthcare and social services through the users' feedback. I organised a database of patients' experience of the local health and social care services and devised community participation strategies for their engagement in service design. Working in often very delicate situations made me even more convinced of the importance of building meaningful relationships between designers and non-designers in processes of design for social change – and even more aware of the intersection of these relationships with larger dynamics of power, inequality, and oppression.

In March 2016, I moved back to Italy. Together with two friends, I founded a non-profit organisation dealing with the collaborative mapping and reuse of abandoned spaces in our hometown. Not long after, I enrolled in a Master course in Project Management for International Cooperation and Local Development; upon completion, I left for Indonesia for a 6-month internship in a local organisation partnering with the United Nations to develop public space projects.

My experience in Indonesia further challenged my perspective. I felt that my curriculum had not appropriately addressed the structures of inequality that shaped the daily experiences of the people I was meant to 'help' with my work. I also had to navigate a different culture and its customs; most of the time, I was the only white person in the room, which felt unfamiliar and made me aware of my whiteness. As I wrote in the introduction to this chapter, I also started to realise that the many tools I had learned to use in my design education only presented one perspective, the Western one, and thus reflected and replicated global hierarchies and patterns of dominance.

I have chosen to work as a designer in the social innovation space because of my discomfort with design's role in 'softening the edges' of capitalism and other systems of oppression, yet I know I cannot separate myself from the society in which I live, with its legacy of colonialism and pervasive systems of 'othering'. I have struggled to position myself as a white woman in a study focused on nuanced approaches to relationships informed by practitioners in Asia Pacific. To be able to explore the margins of my experience as a designer and a researcher by engaging with perspectives that are often marginalised, is a privileged act which has been reinforced by a history of social science and design research centred on whiteness. I hope that designers and researchers will view this study – an exploration of my experience of relating in designing social innovation, informed by practices and experiences in Asia Pacific – as an invitation to examine their practice and their experiences of relating, leading to actions that welcome a stronger plurality in designing social innovation.

## 1.4 Response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Most of this research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and had to adapt to the uncertainty and instability that characterise this time. All travel was suspended as of March 2020, so scheduling further fieldwork in Asia Pacific was impossible. My practice in Italy was suspended almost entirely as of the 9th of March, when Italy was put in lockdown; when activities resumed in June-July 2020, they had to be substantially restructured to respect social distancing, moving all project meetings and activities online. Covid-19 restrictions were reinstated in October 2020, when regions and municipalities were assigned different colour codes according to the severity of the epidemiological scenario. In December 2020, and again in March 2021, my region was classified as a "Red Zone" (highest risk) until May 2021.

The restrictions listed above severely affected all activities connected with data collection. One context of practice for this research is a network of schools – however, all schools introduced distance learning or closed to external staff; all in presence meetings were suspended; and projects in schools had to be restructured to be carried out without co-design activity with the schools' communities or with project partners. Moreover, schools closed for summer in July – right when lockdown measures were lifted.

During the months of July to December 2020, I looked for different opportunities to diversify my field of research. To adapt to restrictions to travel, I found support for my practice through activities carried out online. I engaged with a local community centre (which was also affected by safety measures, but this did not prevent me from staying in touch with key collaborators) and with an online practice group that was not affected by local restrictions. These contexts of practice are described in detail in Chapter 4. I also sought further engagement with practitioners from the Asia Pacific region online.

## 1.5 Thesis outline

To properly structure the narrative and provide an orderly account of the research journey, this thesis is split into three sections.

### Section One: Research set-up

This section builds a strong base for investigation by defining aims and objectives, reviewing the literature, highlighting the relevant gaps in knowledge, and describing the methodology of this research.

Chapter 2 defines and contextualises the key concept of social innovation and its intersection with design; it establishes the main points of reference to understand the fundamental characteristics of work relationships; it problematizes dominant paradigms of design and considers propositions for different paradigms made by scholars and practitioners worldwide.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach to research. It clarifies the epistemological perspective of the researcher and details the strategies and methods of data collection, analysis, and validation for both personal practice in Italy and the external DSI practices in Asia Pacific.

### Section Two: Activity and Analysis

This section presents the research activity and describes how the data were collected and analysed.

Chapter 4 describes the three contexts of practice in detail and explains what data were gathered and how. It expands on the contingencies of each design context, introducing key people and explaining how relationships were initiated and nurtured; it also presents a profile of the DSI practitioners working in the Asia Pacific region who participated in this research.

Chapter 5 elaborates on how the data were processed and analysed, and the different tools and methods used to construct and organise themes into a coherent narrative.

### Section Three: Discussion and Interpretation

This section is the most substantial in the thesis. It offers a discussion and interpretation of the data, presenting a Framework for Relational Literacy consisting of three key themes, each of which is thoroughly described in a relevant chapter. It builds to the conclusions of this thesis with a critical reflection on relational approaches to DSI.

Chapter 6 introduces the Framework for Relational Literacy, clarifies key concepts, and introduces a critical approach to the themes that constitute it.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 introduce the three themes of the Framework for Relational Literacy: ‘Building a system of reciprocity’; ‘Establishing and maintaining mutuality’; and ‘Building a shared relational identity’. Each chapter explores relevant sub-themes and nuances the theme through practitioners’ accounts and reflective practice.

Chapter 10 considers the Framework for Relational Literacy in its entirety, makes propositions for how it may be used and describes its limitations. It also presents overarching challenges for DSI practitioners, concluding with some reflections and recommendations.

Chapter 11 is the conclusion of this thesis. It provides a summary of the insights, describes the contribution to knowledge, discusses the study’s limitations and suggests areas for further research.

# Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter reviews designing social innovation (DSI) from a relational perspective, identifying current themes and highlighting the issues that prompted the research questions in this thesis and influenced my approach in investigating them.

In § 2.1 I consider different definitions and perspectives on social innovation, while § 2.2 explores the intersection of design with social innovation. Section 2.3 outlines the characteristics of professional relationships and considers limitations to their description. Then, § 2.4 and § 2.5 review relevant literature on relationships in DSI and highlight emerging themes and issues. To offer a brief summary and orient the reader, the four emerging themes are summarised below:

- Design has become increasingly collaborative and hybridised with different disciplines. This encourages designers to reflect upon the evolution of our role and question our centrality to the DSI process.
- A lot of DSI work is in creating the adequate infrastructure to support evolving relationships. Most of this work happens in the 'backstage' of the design process, which is still an underexplored area compared to the attention given to methods and tools.
- Affect and emotions are increasingly considered in DSI. They are crucial to relationships, yet vary greatly from context to context, from culture to culture.
- In western DSI theory and practice, there is a fascination with non-rationalist approaches to relationship development and maintenance. This is frequently in contradiction with the mainly rationalist viewpoint that underpins traditional design. Intersubjectivity as a paradigm for socially responsible design sparks interest in relational approaches to DSI as a research field.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on dominant paradigms of design (§ 2.6) and what other paradigms may be considered to nuance our understanding of designing social innovation (§ 2.7), with particular reference to Kasulis's (2002) *Intimacy or Integrity* framework. Again, to briefly summarise the main points:

- There is a dominant paradigm of DSI that upholds Western standards. It is focused on problem definition and problem solving. It uses replicability and scalability as methods of evaluation of DSI projects, and aims to generate methods that are universally applicable. It is grounded in an integrity worldview that values objectivity, logical reasoning, and external relations, and sees knowledge as transferrable through models and tools.
- An 'other' paradigm of DSI carefully considers the positionality of the designer in the DSI process. It centres care, mindfulness and affect. It is grounded in an intimacy worldview which values somatic, affective knowledge and internal relations.

## 2.1 Social innovation: a relational definition

Social innovation is recognised as capable of offering interpretations of, and solutions to, a variety of contemporary societal problems which government policy and market solutions have not been able to solve (Murray et al., 2010). Academic research on social innovation has been growing exponentially since about 2003, with interdisciplinary approaches playing an important role (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). Publications on the topic include reports by various organisations such as The Young Foundation, NESTA or The Hope Institute that approach social innovation from a practical standpoint. There is a lively debate around the definition of social innovation: its strongly contextual and cross-sectorial character makes it hard to define and social innovations can emerge in many different sectors, leading to a variety of meanings and uses of the term (The Young Foundation, 2012). Choi & Majumdar (2015), in their comprehensive effort to conceptualise social innovation, observe that the term is used in contexts as varied as organisational management, social entrepreneurship and social enterprise, capacity building and asset development within communities, and more. The main issue this thesis takes with mainstream conceptualisations of social innovation is that, while relationships are considered a key premise and an important result of social innovation, they are approached in a somewhat managerial way that tends to universalise the experience of relationality and present it as a strategic component of social innovation, overlooking important aspects such as cultural resonance, emotions, and affect.

Cajaiba-Santana (2014) highlights two different perspectives on social innovation. One perspective, derived from Mulgan (2007), focuses on the role of a small number of 'heroic individuals' who pursue a vision and provide solutions to societal problems; this view is often presented in conceptualisations of social innovation as social entrepreneurship or social enterprise. The other perspective, more common in organisational management and institutional change studies, investigates the role of the socio-cultural conditions as determinants of social innovation, holding that social structures can be categorised and analysed to identify the causes, drivers, and barriers to social innovation. This perspective seems to follow a structural-functionalist approach which has been the dominant model for social science research for decades; however, it has been criticised for placing disproportionate emphasis on social structures at the expense of social actors and agency. Cajaiba-Santana (2014) proposes a third view that integrates the two: from the *structuration perspective*, the relationship between actors and structures organically generates social innovation processes. Every social innovation process is unique and complex, since "we are dealing with the real experience of people acting in their environment and participating in the development of social systems and institutions" (2014, p. 8). Cajaiba-Santana describes three complementary conceptualisations of the social innovation process: social innovation emerges from social interaction, through a collective sense-making effort, and as a storytelling process in which events, circumstances and actions are interwoven in a complex plot.

Moulaert et al. (2005, p. 1978) also highlight the processual and relational nature of social innovation, describing it as a path-dependent and contextual change in social relations, and particularly in power relations, to better include groups and individuals that experienced some sort of exclusion. Furthermore, social innovation is, as Franz et al. (2012) point out, an intentional process – it aims to create social change. This intent distinguishes social innovation from business innovation: while social innovation has the goal of benefiting the community and society in general, most business innovations are based upon gaining an economic advantage over competitors (Dawson & Daniel, 2010), with social impact (positive or negative) being at most a by-product of the innovation process.

Summarising different perspectives (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Franz et al., 2012; Heiskala & Hämäläinen, 2007; Mulgan, 2007; Mumford, 2002; Pol & Ville, 2008; Zapf, 1991), social innovation can be described as a process starting with a more or less serendipitous emergence of actors who share common or relatable interests; these actors go through the negotiation and definition of shared goals, elaborate ideas and solutions, and eventually implement and systematise them. The key element to the definition of social innovation processes is that often their product is not a material object, but a social interaction or practice (Choi & Majumdar, 2015). Therefore, social innovation *stems from relationships* and *creates new relationships* (Mulgan, 2007): relationships are both the precondition and the result of social innovation.

In spite of the importance of relationships to social innovation, there are few studies investigating their formation, maintenance, and value in this context. Literature on the topic is fragmented among different fields (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) and mostly relates to the context of organisational management or social entrepreneurship, with an emphasis on strategies for managing relationships with stakeholders or within organisations, while the complex interweaves of sentiments, emotions and social structures that constitute relationships in social innovation are mostly overlooked in academic literature. However, my experience in Indonesia (see Chapter 1) and the findings presented in this thesis suggest there may be different ways of approaching relationships in this field – ways that involve nurturing, more than managing.

Having defined social innovation as contextual, processual, and relational in nature, this chapter now moves on to considering the intersection between social innovation and design.

## 2.2 Designing social innovation

Design is often presented as a valuable tool, knowledge, or method to address social innovation challenges. Design work that intersects, supports, or enables social innovation processes has been given many names and definitions across the past four decades, each aiming to simultaneously frame design's potential in this field and identify limitations to its influence. This thesis aligns with and builds upon critiques of design's intersections with social innovation that take into consideration the ontological paradigm within which designing social innovation takes place, contesting monolithical definitions and understandings of the discipline and its practices.

Many of the social, environmental, and economic concerns surrounding design were elaborated by Papanek in his book *Design for the real world* (1971), where he outlines a new agenda for socially responsible, ethical practice. He suggests designers should take an "integrated" (1971, p. 237) approach to design, considering it as a non-linear series of biological functions that aim to design "extensions of man" (ibid.) addressing human needs rather than market-created wants. Integrated design also places design problems in a historical and social perspective and problematises design's role in perpetuating class systems and social status.

Thirty years after the first publication of Papanek's writings, and in spite of their success, Margolin and Margolin (2002) lamented that efforts to devise alternatives to market-centred product design did not lead to a new model of social design practice. The reason for this shortfall, the authors argue, is the lack of research to demonstrate how design can contribute to human welfare. They draw a parallel between social workers' model of practice – conducted collaboratively with the client and potentially including other "human service professionals" – and the designers' model of practice, suggesting options on how designers might collaborate within intervention teams.

Designing social innovation captured the interest of the British Design Council, the national strategic body for design in the UK: in 2006, a paper was published outlining the characteristics and challenges of "transformation design" (Burns et al., 2006). Although the authors do not mention social innovation directly, the paper clearly outlines a possible definition of design approaches to social innovation processes. In transformation design, designers and clients (re)define the design brief in partnership, form interdisciplinary design teams that employ participatory design techniques and use capacity building to ensure the sustainability of the design process, understanding that "design is never done" (2006, p. 21). Transformation design also implies the acceptance that the designed output might deviate from tradition (for example by introducing new roles, systems, or policies rather than products) and potentially transform a company's culture or even a system at national level. The authors observe that transformation design shapes behaviour as well as form and demands a holistic understanding of the issues at hand, including the relationships between different components, actors, and institutions.

In recent times, Manzini (2015) has proposed a definition of DSI that considers the role that expert design can have in activating, sustaining and orienting processes of social change towards sustainability. In his book *Design when everybody designs,* he states that design is practised potentially by everyone, but only for some it becomes a professional activity; when this activity is aimed at social innovation, "design for social innovation" can take place. To Manzini, social innovation relies on the emergence and encounter of the right people, expertise, and material assets: what he calls a "collaborative organisation" (2015, p. 77), that is a social group emerging in an "enabling ecosystem" (2015, p. 90), whose members choose to collaborate. Collaborative organisations differ from traditional communities by virtue of their openness and reversibility: members have complete freedom to join and leave the group.

Whether named integrated design (Papanek, 1971), social design (Margolin & Margolin, 2002), transformation design (Burns et al., 2006), or design for social innovation (Manzini, 2015), the described activities within a social innovation process have the use of design methods and tools as a common trait. These techniques and instruments are borrowed from various currents of thought and practice, with several consultancies further developing methods and design approaches to social innovation in recent times. It would be difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of the surge of interest in DSI in the past years, but a combination between the progressive dismantlement of the welfare state in Europe, which left challenges to solve through private or semi-public initiatives, and the financial crisis of 2008, which reduced traditional job opportunities for designers forcing them to seek new markets, might have contributed to opening the social innovation field to design. Designing social innovation is now recognised as a valid field of research and practice (Chen et al., 2016) and a growing body of literature explores the values, approaches, methods, tools, and impact of DSI practice.

Many have embraced DSI enthusiastically, but critical perspectives are also emerging. Some denounce a lack of evidence of the effectiveness of a design approach to social innovation (Komatsu et al., 2016; Mulgan, 2014) without necessarily questioning the paradigm within which designing social innovation is practised and taught. Others are highlighting the challenges and limitations of traditional design in dealing with the characteristics of social innovation processes (e.g., Akama & Yee, 2019; Chen et al., 2016; Hillgren et al., 2011) and opening debate on the ontological grounds of design (Escobar, 2017; Fry, 2011; Fry & Nocek, 2020; Willis, 2006). The expression 'designing social innovation' used throughout this thesis is derived from Akama and Yee's (2016, 2019) work in the Designing Social Innovation in Asia-Pacific Network (DESIAP); among the aims of the organisation is to surface the importance of relationships and the often hidden practices, approaches and values that support them, in the awareness that working to foster social innovation means to design the socio-material circumstances for both new and established relationships to thrive. Just as social innovation is ongoing and processual, so is the act of designing it, and this might look, feel, and be described in ways that are radically different from what the dominant, western-centric paradigm commonly presents. Thus, it is hard to conceptualise design only as working 'for' social innovation, lending its tools and techniques to the practice; a mere juxtaposition of the terms, as in 'design *and* social innovation', does not accurately render the profound entanglement between the two, the continually changing relationships between the people involved, and the ever-shifting individual and collective identities that constitute the design 'context'. While there certainly is space for the aforementioned denominations, I chose to use 'designing social innovation' to encourage a more critical and nuanced stance, beginning to highlight cultural and relational sensitivity as ontological and methodological necessities for the field.

Having reviewed the intersection of design with social innovation, I now focus on defining work relationships and identifying relevant characteristics for the purpose of this research.

## 2.3 Defining relationships

This research is centred upon my personal practice as a designer involved in projects and relationships in three different contexts. It focuses on core relationships with specific colleagues, collaborators, and project partners. Particularly, it centres dyadic relationships as a key component of group and networks: “much of what transpires in organisations takes place via dyadic interaction” (Liden et al., 2016, p. 160). For each relationship and interaction (see Chapter 4 for a detailed description of the contexts of practice), this research considers contextual specificities, cultural nuances, the affective and reflective dimension, as well as the role of power and conflict, aiming to develop a different approach than the strategic, managerial one that characterises current understandings of the role of relationships in designing social innovation.

Since current literature directly relevant to relationships in processes of DSI is scarce, the study draws from research in other fields to identify the different factors at play in the building and maintenance of work relationships. There are many different perspectives and schools of thought with regards to how relationships are examined and understood. Below I summarise the main points of reference used to build an understanding of relationships for the purpose of this research.

Relationship science is a relatively young field that has seen a surge in the volume of research outcomes during the latter years of the 1990s (Berscheid & Reis, 1998, p. 253). It has an international scope and an interdisciplinary nature (Berscheid, 1999), and is thus perceived as a vast and somewhat unorganised field expanding in many different directions, including psychology (clinical, social, and developmental), communication, anthropology, sociology, and economy. Scholars in these different fields recognise the importance of relationship research and theory in their discipline (Vangelisti & Perlman, 2006). The focus of relationship science is to understand the laws that dictate the interactions between people and influence individuals’ behaviour (Berscheid, 1999) by observing their interaction. Many of the efforts in the field focus on close, intimate, personal relationships, but relationship science has provided insight into work relationships, particularly regarding their affective, emotional dimensions and the role of trust (Ferris et al., 2009).

To deepen the understanding of professional relationships, this thesis also draws concepts from organisational psychology and management theories that highlight the importance of dyadic relationships in a work setting. Notable ones are Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and Employee-Organisation Relationships (EOR). They are, respectively, an approach to researching leadership that focuses on the relationship between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and an overarching term to describe relationships between employees and organisations (Shore et al., 2004, p. 292). Both approaches observe the specificities of relationships and interactions, characterised by trust, mutuality, and reciprocity within complex contextual environments.

Research on social networks has also contributed to expanding the knowledge on relationships. A social network approach views the dyadic connection as the fundamental unit of analysis, although social networks might theoretically contain an unlimited number of interactions at different levels (Ferris et al., 2009). In his seminal work on social networks and social capital, Granovetter (1973) laid the basis for the development of a social network approach to relationships that defines actors as nodes, and relationships between them as ties. Different types of social capital characterise these ties. Social capital can be understood as "an attribute of individuals and of their relationships that enhance their ability to solve collective-action problems" (Ostrom & Ahn, 2009, p. 20). "Bonding" social capital identifies the ties between people who have "high levels of similarity in demographic characteristics, attitudes, and available information and resources" (Claridge, 2018, p. 2), while "bridging" social capital describes connections between communities, groups and organisations that may have shared interests or goals, but different social identities (Pelling & High, 2005). A third type of social capital, which has been conceptualised as a subtype of bridging ties, is "linking" social capital, which describes relationships between individuals or groups in different social classes (Claridge, 2018). Linking social capital can grant access to information, wealth and other resources to groups or individuals with a lower socio-economic status. Again, trust has been identified as an important element, with studies investigating the connections between innovation and social capital identifying social trust and altruism as indicators of social capital (Doh & Acs, 2010).

While a typology of social capital can be useful to understand the different types of relationships in the context of a DSI initiative, the notion of social capital is not to be assumed uncritically. Law and Mooney (2006) have criticised the concept as it reduces relationships to a form of capital, that is, an asset that promises the generation of a future income stream. Relationships are viewed as a stock of resources with fixed characteristics, instead of a complex variety of qualitative phenomena. Edwards (2004) problematises social capital as placing the responsibility for its loss on people and communities who already have low levels of social capital, rather than on the social structures and means of social reproduction that are dictated by the dominant political and economic interests.

Paying greater attention to the context where interactions take place, to relational specificities, and to the particularities of the people involved can bring to a greater understanding of how relationships are built and maintained. In other words, those attributes that are often simplified and generalised in frameworks deserve more consideration and observation of unique characteristics occurring because of specific entanglements. Considering specific and sometimes diverging understandings of relationships is of increasing relevance for this thesis as we examine how dominant paradigms and worldviews shape our perception and our actions with regards to relationships in DSI. These issues are further explored in § 2.6, § 2.7 and throughout the thesis.

### 2.3.1 Characteristics of professional relationships

Having established the main points of reference for defining and describing relationships, I now propose two definitions that can be used as a starting point for their description:

> *"A relationship involves a series of interactions between two individuals known to each other. Relationships involve behavioural, cognitive, and affective (or emotional) aspects. Formal relationships are distinct from personal relationships. Relationships in which most of the behaviour of the participants is determined by their position in society, where they do not rely on knowledge of each other, are role or formal relationships".*
> (Hinde, 1979; in Vangelisti & Perlman, 2006, p. 3)

> *"Two people are in a relationship with one another if they impact on each other, if they are interdependent in the sense that a change in one person causes a change in the other and vice versa".*
> (Kelley et al., 1983; in Vangelisti & Perlman, 2006, p. 3)

These two definitions give important clues as to what the constituting elements of a relationship are. Firstly, both authors define a relationship as happening between two people. In sociology, this is commonly referred to as a 'dyad'. Liden et al. (2016, p. 140) argue that dyads are the "key element or building block of groups" and "represent key components of social networks", as most interactions happen on a one-to-one basis. Interactions shape relationships, each interaction being characterised by behaviour, cognition, and emotions (Hinde, 1979). Roles also appear relevant in a relationship: personal relationships do not have to fulfil certain role expectations as much as formal (role) relationships. From Kelley et al. (1983), it appears that mutual impact and interdependency are two fundamental elements of relationships.

Because this research focuses on relationships that involve people acting in a professional capacity, it is appropriate to include a definition of work relationships:

> *"Work relationships generally refer to patterns of exchanges between two interacting members or partners, whether individuals, groups, or organisations, typically directed at the accomplishment of some common objectives or goals".* (Ferris et al., 2009)

This definition highlights the instrumental (at least initially) character of relationships in a work setting: the interaction is geared at the completion of a task or achievement of an objective. Ferris et al. (2009) offer a review of the literature on work relationships and their underlying dimensions and propose an integrative model of work relationships that draws on Relationship Science, LMX, EOR and social network theory. The authors describe initial interactions as characterised by instrumentality. The quality of the relationship depends on the expectation that each participant in the dyad holds, and might be influenced by each participant's interest in establishing or maintaining a specific role within the organisation.

The relationship evolves through the formation of a relational identity; trust, respect, affect, and support play an increasingly important part in forming a judgement about the other participant. The relationship can remain 'low-quality' and instrumental or evolve so that participants start to see it not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. Flexibility is required to handle incompatibility and disagreement, with each participant needing to show the ability to compromise and negotiate. As the reciprocal commitment grows, the need to maintain a shared relational identity increases, with loyalty, commitment and accountability playing a key role.

Other elements characterising relationships in this model are the passing of time, during which a relationship changes; physical and psychological distance; reputation; dissolution, intended as the voluntary or involuntary interruption of the relationship, or redefinition, intended as the replacement of the work relationship with a friendship or with a lower quality, instrumental relationship in the presence of significant hostility and resentment. Many of these elements are significant for the analysis and interpretation of data collected in this research (Chapters 6-10); attributes of relationships with a particular relevance to this thesis are further defined below.

### Reciprocity and mutuality

Pelling and High (2005, p. 311) define reciprocity as “a social attribute through which trust is enacted in interpersonal transfers of information or resources”. ‘Balanced’ reciprocity identifies routine exchanges between individuals, while ‘generalised’ or ‘open’ reciprocity involves the idea of helping someone without expecting reciprocation but trusting that a third party will be willing to help in the future due to an increase in reputation (Graeber, 2001; Sahlins, 1965). In psychological contract theory (Shore et al., 2004), reciprocity is defined as what dyadic members believe they owe each other in exchange for contributions the other has made.

Reciprocity is often associated with mutuality, that is, the extent of agreement between dyadic parties regarding the nature of the relationship and its specific terms (Shore et al., 2004). Mutuality is configured as a connection with, or understanding of another that facilitates a dynamic process of exchange (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Henson, 1997; Jordan et al., 2004) and implies a relationship in which certain actions are performed by two people with respect to one another (Graumann, 1995).

Reciprocity and mutuality are further defined and discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

### Trust

Trust is critical for the success of most professional relationships (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996) and a fundamental element of both mutuality and reciprocity. It evolves based on past experiences and interactions, entails some attributions of disposition to the other participant in the dyad (e.g., reliability or dependability), and involves an element of risk and a related element of faith, for example in sacrificing present rewards in hopes that this will lead to future gains (Rempel et al., 1985). Lewicki and Bunker (1996) present a model for parties entering a new relationship based on three-stages: calculus-based trust, that is, the initial calculation of the reward of being trustworthy against the loss of reputation if trust is violated; knowledge-based trust, founded on the other's predictability; and identification-based trust, grounded in mutual understanding that develops over time. Similarly, Kramer (1999) considers trust as rational (based on calculation) or relational (based on a social inclination to trust). The development of trust in a dyadic relationship can be facilitated by an external 'guarantor' of trustworthiness: the relationship is strengthened when both participants share a connection with a third person (Ferrin et al., 2006). Trust is further explored in § 8.2.

**Relational identity and roles**

Identity and how individuals define themselves are important for the development of relationships. Brewer and Gardner (1996) postulate there are three 'levels' of identity: individual, interpersonal and collective. Building upon their work, Sluss and Ashforth (2007) have proposed the concept of 'relational identity', which involves all three levels of self. Relational identity integrates personal identities with role-based identities (i.e., the goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles, and time horizons typically associated with a professional role) of two individuals in a role-relationship, so that their relational identity is more than the sum of its parts. Relational identity is further examined in Chapter 9.

### 2.3.2 Limitations to descriptions of relationships

It is appropriate to acknowledge here the limitations to accounts of relational dynamics in any context. Hinde points out (1979, p. 52) that a description of relationships should never aim to be complete, simply because it cannot be. Each interaction contributes to the formation of a relationship and is constituted by a large amount of actions by both participants; these form a complicated pattern which never fits an ideal model.

There are many elements that impact the formation and maintenance of relational bonds, such as emotion; cognition; the frequency of interaction; whether interaction follows a certain pattern or sequence; the personal reflection and distortions of participants in the interaction; the context, time, cultural differences; the existence of each relationship in a network of other relationships. Furthermore, an observer's point of view will always be different from that of a participant in an interaction. For this reason, every description of a relationship is a simplification suited to a specific research task (Hinde, 1997, p. 53). Finally, any sociologically defined category used to describe relationships is likely guided by initial preconceptions that we derive from our culture, which can put researchers at risk of losing sight of how individuals describe relationships (Hinde, 1997, p. 70-71). Considering this limitation here is essential as the research progresses into the construction of a framework that, as explained in Chapters 6 and 10, does not aim to constitute a model of relationships in DSI.

Having offered a definition of relationships and having introduced the main characteristics of professional relationships relevant to this thesis, I now consider the role of relationships in designing social innovation.

## 2.4 Relationships in DSI

The importance of relationships for processes of designing social innovation has been acknowledged in academic discourse (Jégou & Manzini, 2008). A closer look to recent studies can identify two broad currents (Tjahja, 2019): one describes social relations as functional to DSI processes, while the other holds that the outcomes of design bring a positive change in social relations within a specific context. Both these perspectives, which are not mutually exclusive, hold design as central to the social innovation process: it provides the "enabling ecosystem" (Manzini, 2015, p. 90) within which relationships can be born, while relationships are also useful to its outcomes. Approaching these two perspectives critically, it is possible to identify avenues for further exploration of relationships in DSI. The following paragraphs introduce key issues around four emerging themes, which constitute a space of exploration for this thesis: the role of professional designers in DSI processes; the continuation of design through the scaffolding of relational bonds ('infrastructuring'); the role of values, emotions, and other detailed and personal aspects in co-design processes; and attempts to combine a non-rationalist approach to relationships in DSI with traditional design's tools and methods.

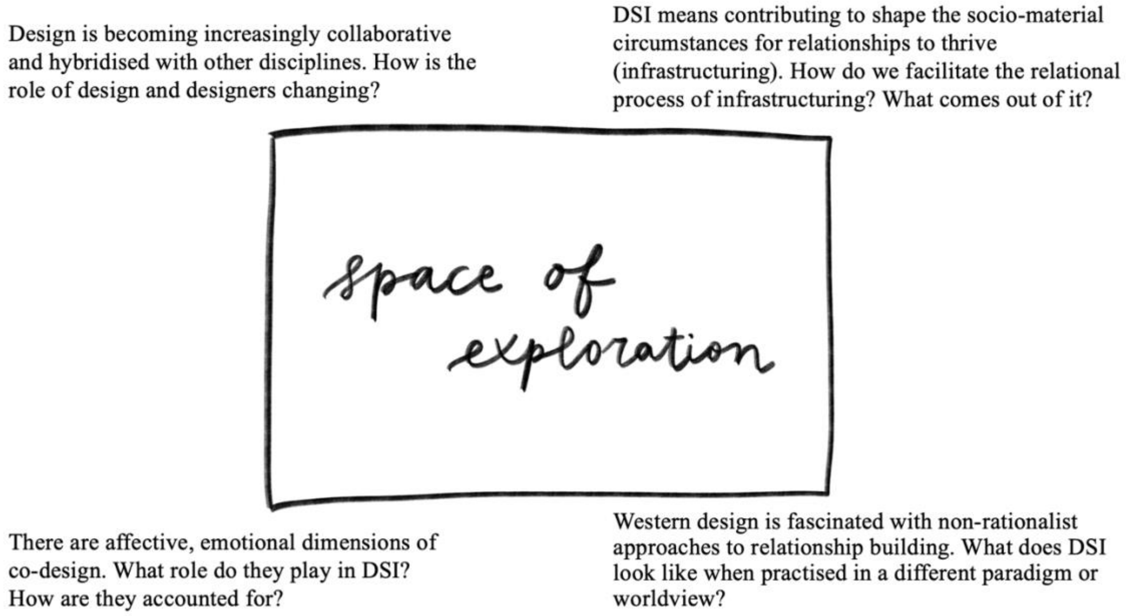


*Figure 2.1 The four emerging themes that define a space of exploration for this research*

### 2.4.1 Shifting roles in DSI processes

Design practice and research are shifting towards collaborative, participatory approaches (Sanders, 2006) and increasingly welcome the influence of other disciplines and subject specialist areas (Dykes et al., 2009). Moreover, the popularisation of 'design thinking' in an organisational context by proponents such as Brown (2009) and Martin (2009; see Kimbell, 2011), has promoted a widespread use of its methods and tools by non-designers in a variety of contexts, including social innovation. This phenomenon has opened a debate on whether professional designers should be placed at the centre of a DSI process, and calls for an examination of what role(s), actions and outcomes have characterised designers in DSI processes, and how these might have changed over time.

When he outlined the principles of "integrated design" (see § 2.2), Papanek (1971) advocated for a transition of the designer's role from vertical specialist to horizontal generalist, sensitive to different contributions from the various members of a multidisciplinary design team and able to synthesise them into designs to achieve socially responsible goals. Reviewing Papanek's concept of socially responsible design, Margolin and Margolin (2002) lament a lack of research to validate designers' contribution to human welfare, and wonder what role designers can play in collaborative processes of social intervention (2002, p. 28).

Designers' role in DSI processes remains a key concern as Burns et al. (2006, p. 11) state that "designers are uniquely placed to help solve complex social and economic problems", but also list "practical" and "philosophical" challenges facing designers, including the loss of personal creative authorship as designers become facilitators and questions around what makes a professional designer when design is done in a shared community.

Manzini and Rizzo reaffirm the "strong and relevant, even leading role" (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011, p. 202) that formally trained designers play in design initiatives that support social innovation. Manzini (2015) details different roles that design experts can take on: facilitators of conversations, activists triggering new collaborative organisations, strategists connecting local initiatives and people, and promoters of design culture. Yee et al. (2017) identify seven roles to drive change by design in processes of organisational transformation – including roles that are eminently relational such as "power broker" and "community builder".

Strategic design skills are listed as essential to cultivate the "socio-material assemblies" (Ehn, 2008; Manzini & Rizzo, 2011) which are the starting point for social innovation to develop and transform. Nelson and Stolterman (2012) discuss the designer's strategic role in the formation of design teams; according to the authors, designers create a "complex web of relationships" with people who take part in the design process, who also can take on different and shifting roles. Designers must therefore evaluate each "interrelationship or interconnection" between different roles and compose "design protocols" (Nelson & Stolterman, 2012, p. 51) that guide the formation of connections between actors. The authors encourage designers to experiment with different configurations to prefigure how each combination might influence the design process: the very combination of design protocols, according to the authors, must be designed to achieve a “conspiracy” – literally a ‘breathing together’ – of the design team.

In these perspectives, design is central to social innovation practice; the designer is assumed to be the key agent of change, able to weave relationships and create ‘enabling environments’ that sustain positive social capital (Dutton & Baker, 2007). Non-designers can demonstrate designerly skills, but the professional designer retains leadership and adopts multiple, shifting roles. Yet, professional design authority is being challenged. Tjahja (2019) notes that the designer’s role in social innovation is being questioned to the point that a “designer’s identity crisis” (2019, p. 223) is now an identifiable phenomenon. The recent volume *Design in Crisis* (Fry & Nocek, 2020) places design at the centre of a series of interrelated planetary crises, calling for a radical problematisation of both its engagement with the planet and itself. Indeed, some of the perspectives listed above seem quite defensive of the integrity of the designer’s identity – even when they present it as dematerialised across a variety of ever-changing roles and entangled in a complex web of relationships. Key concerns emerge around the role of design and designers, on our identity and how we perceive ourselves in the DSI process.

### 2.4.2 Infrastructuring in DSI

This section reviews infrastructuring (Karasti & Syrjänen, 2004) and its significance for participatory design (PD) and DSI, setting it as a critical component of the space of exploration for this inquiry.

Participatory design has been historically invested in developing the participation of those who will be most impacted by specific design projects, processes, decisions, and outcomes and strengthening their knowledge, skills, and political engagement (Ehn, 1988; Greenbaum, 1991; Robertson & Simonsen 2012). Infrastructuring is the work of engaging with infrastructures, that is, complex, socio-material relationships which are constantly changing (Bowker & Star, 1999; Karasti, 2014; Neumann & Star 1996; Star & Ruhleder 1994). It is always situated in a specific, local context which, in turn, sits within a larger system with a broader time horizon (Karasti & Baker, 2008; Karasti & Syrjänen, 2004). The members of a community of practice do infrastructuring in order to maintain through time the work that initially drew them together (Karasti & Baker 2008). The goal of infrastructuring is "continuing design" (Karasti, 2014, p. 142): allowing participants, including those who join the process in later phases, to appropriate the design as it evolves and changes (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013).

The notion of 'publics' is particularly significant to infrastructuring: publics are conglomerations of actors with a plurality of voices, positions, opinions, and roles, united by the desire to address an issue. Actors in publics have 'attachments', a complex entanglement of relationships with each other, with their environment, with the issues they face, with available resources, with existing institutions (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013). Infrastructuring is the ability to map out existing "knotworks and networks" in these entanglements (Bødker et al., 2017, p. 252) and to provide "scaffolding for affective bonds that are necessary for the construction of publics" (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013 p. 260). Recent literature suggests that the formation of relationships is a phenomenon that professional designers embed in the design process and is therefore within their agency and responsibility (Dindler & Iversen, 2014, p. 43).

The processes through which designers build relationships have varying levels of publicity and explicitness: a large part of the work aimed at forming, nurturing and consolidating relationships is done in the 'backstage' of the design process (Dindler & Iversen, 2014) in the form of one-to-one conversations, asynchronous work such as email or text message exchange, and even personal reflection. These activities may seem a by-product of design compared to 'front stage' activities such as workshops or presentations, but they are increasingly considered a fundamental element of relationship formation in a design context.

The infrastructuring approach seems particularly apt to social innovation processes, which – in the proposed definition – are centred upon creating dialogue and surfacing the perspectives of a heterogenous group of people with varying relationships, with the goal of enhancing its capacity to act. It is also eminently political (Clement et al., 2012; Agid, 2018): infrastructuring work brings about questions such as what is the intended change, transformation, or outcome of the work, who is involved in it, and whom it benefits.

To summarise, infrastructuring is a complex topic that can translate into multiple design practices. Possible approaches include supporting the long-term work of localised communities; building publics; understanding the entanglements between publics and their context; reflect and reveal the socio-political contexts which infrastructures stem from and that they continue to replicate; etcetera.

There is no doubt that the concept of infrastructuring is crucial to this research. In the following chapters, I detail the contexts of my practice and progressively identify and reveal their infrastructures and how they evolved through continuously shifting relationships. I also observe how I position myself in relationship to the people and the infrastructures that constitute the contexts of practice. However, this thesis simply identifies infrastructuring as one of the ‘four corners’ of its area of exploration. The reason for this choice is that while theory on infrastructuring in participatory design and DSI acknowledges the importance of interpersonal relationships, relatively little work has been done to explore the detail of how these relationships are formed and how they are nurtured, and how we – as designers, but also as ‘regular people’ participating in a process of change – engage with the messy, fuzzy, contradictory, even conflictual dimensions of infrastructuring in ways that are mindful, caring, respectful, and accountable.

I therefore feel I need to look elsewhere to build a more nuanced understanding of PD theory and practice centred on infrastructuring. I observe my practice through the lens of the other three emerging themes too, looking for commonalities and overlaps between them: the questions around the role of design and designers in DSI, the affective dimension of DSI, and the emergence of non-rationalist approaches to relationships in Western DSI, which bring forth reflections on what paradigm DSI is situated in. I reference the work of Light, Akama (Light & Akama, 2012, 2014, 2018; Akama et al., 2019), Suchman (2002), and Agid (2018), as these authors raise important questions on the ability of traditional design education and training to stimulate the designers’ awareness of questions such as power, decision making, responsibility and reciprocity, which are central to infrastructuring. They also emphasise embodied practice, the affective dimension, and how design can be situated in different paradigms; these aspects are defined and explored in the following sections.

### 2.4.3 Affect and the creation of value in co-design contexts

As discussed above, supporting the creation of affective bonds is considered to be within the agency of the designer (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013; Dindler & Iversen, 2014). Research related to emotions in co-design processes is focused mainly on the figure of the designer and his or her ability to take on the role of facilitator (Tan, 2012), to display ‘emotional’ or ‘social’ intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and to ‘empathise’ with participants (Crossley, 2003; Kouprie & Visser, 2009).

However, some researchers have focused on different attributes of the affective domain of co-design. For example, Warwick (2015) discusses trust in social design processes, how it can be obtained by the designer, and its significance for design practice; her study focuses on recording perceptions of three communities she supported in a co-design process, as she developed trusting relationships with their members.

Vyas et al. (2016; Vyas & Young, 2017) investigated what factors might influence the interaction and construction of relationships with people in DSI processes, identifying “inner values” as critical in this sense. Defined as the intrinsic worth that a person attributes to thoughts and ideas, inner values influence a person’s attitude and choices and are closely tied with emotions. In their study, Vyas and Young (2017) considered seven inner values to teamwork in design for social innovation, taken from a variety of academic sources, and tested them against the perception of 29 participants, all expert designers, from different organisations across Europe and the United States. According to the authors, the data collected reveals the complexity of design projects in social innovation contexts, leading to more questions than answers.

Both studies acknowledge that values and emotions are culturally and subjectively relative, that universal models cannot be produced or mechanically replicated and that extending the studies to include the perspective of people of non-Western cultures might lead to entirely different results. Furthermore, both studies focus on the perspective of expert designers, but it can be argued that the affective domain of all participants plays an important role in the design process. Their emotions and values might have an impact on the experience of interaction, on the willingness or ability to interact, and ultimately on relationship formation and maintenance.

Agid and Chin (2019) interrogate the creation of value in collaborative design processes and rearticulate it as co-created through affectively charged, context-specific relationships. The authors centre presence and embodied, active work focused on being there for others and making space for collective reflection and the construction of shared understanding. Tools used for this purpose are both planned and emergent and can be negotiated and changed with participants; the designers' presence involves knowing when to step back and let others become leaders. Value is produced not through the designer's initiative or instigation, but through their "joining in, when invited, and finding [their] way" (2019, p. 7).

There are countless factors at play in a co-design process, such as the size of the group where an interaction takes place, its perceived homogeneity, the self-perception of the involved individuals, cultural differences among group members, and power relationships (Oishi et al., 2008; Rogers & Biesanz, 2014); in this complexity, the affective outcome of a social interaction is important in a co-design process, but difficult to predict. Design might play a role in constructing moments of interaction by devising their context and the artefacts supporting them, but has very limited control over the experience of the interaction; its construction, in fact, is down to the participants, who through interaction create "co-experiences" (Battarbee, 2003; Ivey & Sanders, 2006) and who might experience interactions outside of the specific design context, which then influence the design process and the relationships developing within it. Key concerns emerge around how design work and the affective dimension interact and are mutually constituted, as well as around how this process is accounted for by designers engaged in a DSI process.

### 2.4.4 Non-rationalist approaches to relationships DSI

Kimbell and New (2013) note that although design is frequently positioned in contrast to the rationalist, analytical approaches most commonly attributed to traditional management consultancy, the working practices of the two fields have significant overlaps. A certain type of "rationalist empathy", framed as a skill or functional element and overlooking the need for deep connection and resonance, is often associated with management consulting, and compared with the more "aesthetic, intuitive empathy" of the designer (Kimbell & New, 2013, p. 5). In spite of the relational abilities that are often attributed to designers, how this second type of empathy can be developed, and how, if at all, its qualities can be infused in specific design tools remain open to debate.

Non-rationalist approaches to relationships, such as Buber's (1923) philosophy of dialogue and concept of 'intersubjectivity', are increasingly being considered in socially responsible design to address these concerns. Buber's *I and Thou* (1923) illustrates an orientation of heart, mind and spirit that is essential to sincere, honourable relationships. To the author, people have two different ways to engage with the world: experience and encounter. Experience happens when a subject meets an object in an 'I-It' combination, where other beings are reduced to mere objects of thought and relationships are approached instrumentally. Encounter, in contrast, happens in an 'I-Thou' combination, where the other is encountered in its entirety, not as a sum of its qualities. In encounter, we do not gather data to analyse with reason: we simply enter, with our whole being, in a relationship. There is something to encounters which we cannot describe, that happens in the 'interpersonal space' of dialogue. Both modalities have their function: 'I-It' establishes the world of experience, while 'I-Thou' establishes the world of relationship.

Many are still exploring the reception of Buber's concept of intersubjectivity in different disciplines (for example, Mendes-Flohr, 2015), including design. This exploration is not always easy: Buber's aphoristic writing style and interest with spiritual life and Eastern and Western mystical traditions are not easily translated into design principles, as demonstrated by the following examples.

Cipolla and Manzini (2009) have considered the significance of Buber's philosophy of dialogue to the design of "relational services", that is, services that are based on interpersonal relational qualities and "generate a particular form of efficiency in achieving desired results" (2009 p. 5). The examples presented by the authors, a walking bus and a home restaurant, rely also on an "unpredictable human aspect" (2009, p. 5): the strength of interpersonal relationships *prior* to any engagement with expert designers. To the authors, relational services cannot be fully designed to the detail of pre-defined performances: they can only be 'enabled', that is, they need to be supported by continuing the creation of opportunities of encounter between participants. A following study by Cipolla and Bartholo (2014), however, seems to overlook important aspects of this enablement work. Students of a university campus were encouraged to design new services and facilities, adapting IDEO's Human Centred Design toolkit (IDEO, 2015) to enable dialogue. The approach is hardly distinguishable from conventional design thinking and dismisses the project delivery phase as less affected by the dialogical approach. This appears to be in contrast with Cipolla and Manzini's (2009) focus on enablement of service development, which suggested that continued engagement throughout the delivery phase was key to support the continuity of the services. All in all, the study seems to try and fit a non-rationalist philosophical approach within a somewhat rigid design toolkit that cannot support dialogue in a Buberian sense.

This incongruity was also highlighted by Ho and Lee (2012); in a participatory design project engaging design students and end users, they demonstrated that trying to construct the 'persona' of one of the participants reverted the relationship from an 'I-Thou' encounter to an 'I-It' experience (2012, p. 81). Although intersubjectivity in design practice is still an under-researched topic, it can be argued that it requires engagement with a different way of approaching design that allows the formation and maintenance of a dialogical space.

## 2.5 Emerging themes in relational DSI

The themes discussed in § 2.4 show that DSI is concerned with a variety of relational issues.

Changes in design practice towards collaborative ways of designing and the hybridization of design with different disciplines encourage us to reflect upon the evolution of the role of design and designers, and to question the centrality of designers to the DSI process.

Concerns for the sustainability of design practice and of design solutions urge us to conceive ways for design to continue even after the experts (and possibly the funders) have left the field, through the creation of an adequate infrastructure to support evolving relationships. However, when we look 'behind the scenes' of a design process, we might realise that most of what constitutes an infrastructure in DSI is unseen or invisible, including the ideas, rules, ethical and social practices through which people enact relationships, the work going on in the ‘backstage’ of the DSI process to scaffold a relationship, and the relationships that are constituted and reconstituted when designers are not present.

We are also prompted to assess our understanding of the values and emotions that we bring to the design process, to imagine how we might navigate those brought by other stakeholders (particularly when the design process is developed across different cultures) and to evaluate how we account for the affective dimension in DSI.

Finally, the fascination of DSI theory and practice with non-rationalist approaches to relationship building and maintenance often clashes with the predominantly rationalist worldview in which traditional design sinks its roots, producing unconvincing narratives on the ability of expert designers to ‘empathise’ in particular ways. Interest for intersubjectivity as a framework for socially responsible design illuminates relational approaches to DSI as a relevant avenue for research.

These four emerging themes identify a space of exploration for this thesis which, as presented in the following chapters, considers interactions and dynamics that are often unseen or treated as marginal in design, including the affective and emotional aspects of relationships; explores how DSI is thought and practised in different worldviews; and interrogates the role and the identity of the designer in DSI processes.

Discourse shows that the study of designing social innovation is making significant progress, but there are also a number of issues that must be addressed in order to surface the dynamics of relationships in DSI processes. A growing body of literature highlights the limitations of traditional design – such as its Eurocentricity and fixation with methods and tools – in dealing with the complexity of social innovation processes. An increasing number of academics and practitioners are looking at and drawing from different practices and worldviews, building a more nuanced understanding of designing social innovation. This topic is the focus of the following paragraphs.

## 2.6 The dominant paradigm of design

In recent times, there has been a proliferation of design models, toolkits and paradigms that present design activity as the application of isolated methods, tools, and techniques to produce replicable, scalable design solutions to social problems. Examples of this approach are *Design for Social Impact: A How-to Guide* (IDEO & The Rockefeller Foundation, 2008), the *Social Design Methods Menu* (Kimbell & Julier, 2012), the *Collective Action Toolkit* (Frogdesign, 2012) and the *Field Guide to Human-Centered Design* (IDEO, 2015). Together with these toolkits, the vast majority of publications and case studies examining the origins and history of DSI are concerned with social innovation happening in a European or North American context.

The predominance of case studies from the West might have unknowingly created a pattern of replicable methods and best-practices from which a dominant, Western paradigm of design has emerged. Design is then widely known, taught, and practised from an essentially Western perspective and according to the values of the majority of the Western world: Bousbaci (2008) traced the history of the "model of the designer" that evolved from Cartesian thinking, through rationalist views of design as a problem-framing and problem-solving activity – including the emphasis on ill-formulated and confusing "wicked problems" (Buchanan, 1992; West Churchman, 1967). To some, the initial developments of design have contributed to shape it as a technocratic, market-centred practice that is rooted in modernity, in patriarchal culture and in a dichotomous view of the world that sees culture counterposed to nature and employs design to assert man's power over his environment (Illich, 1973; Papanek, 1971).

Akama et al. (2019) note that the emphasis on design models and tools lends the practice an aura of scientific universality that may erase the complexity of the realities where design takes place as well as the complexity of designers themselves, who are portrayed as objective, culturally neutral and interchangeable problem-solvers. The popular presentation of design as a problem-solving activity introduced by Simon in the early 1970s orients the exploration of the context towards the identification of a "problem space" (Newell & Simon, 1972), implicitly addressing the complexity of the world as a series of problems to solve. In a thoroughly confusing context, expert designers have the power to subjectively structure the problem by imposing goals or choosing priorities (Dorst, 2004) and thus emerge as anything but objective and neutral; their work is, in fact, deeply political, as problem statements imply possible solutions (Escobar, 2017, p. 185).

In the dominant design paradigm, the tendency is to gloss over the political dimension of design, and to focus on tools and mindsets that might guide designers in framing design problems. Going back to ‘empathy’ as a key skill of designers, IDEO (2015) promotes a practical approach to DSI and suggests that it might help designers understand the people they are designing for. However, when toolkits emphasise action without due attention to issues such as care, ethics and politics, efforts to empathise with users may result in crossing boundaries, intruding into the participants’ lives (Akama et al., 2019). The very notion of ‘designing *for*’ frames the relationship between designer and client as purely instrumental. Furthermore, consistently defining design as problem-solving might erase other understandings of design – as a sense-making activity, as storytelling, as knowledge-sharing, as dialogue, even as a spiritual practice. This tendency is reflected in how design solutions are evaluated in the social innovation field: growth, scalability and replicability are the predominant ways of measuring their success and impact. Sustainability is framed as mainly economic, and the creation of value is measured in terms of ‘design outcomes’, sidelining other aspects of co-design such as cultural resonance, knowledge transmission and conviviality (Akama, 2017; Akama et al., 2019).

## 2.7 Different paradigms of design

Aware of the described limitations, design researchers and practitioners are exploring how design is practised within a different paradigm – one that is “relational” (Escobar 2017), “futuring” (Fry, 2008), “convivial” (Illich 1973), “respectful and reciprocal” (Akama et al., 2019) by drawing on different theoretical frameworks such as feminism, decolonial theory, the Zapatista movement, and Indigenous thought. Addressing the prevalence of one paradigm over another does not mean attempting to overturn the paradigm – rather, it opens up spaces to discuss the issues that stem from operating within a single paradigm, and to envision how design thinking and doing might look like within a variety of worldviews. This section presents Kasulis’s *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002) as a lens to analyse DSI and the different worldviews that might influence it.

### 2.7.1 Kasulis's Intimacy or Integrity framework

The framework proposed by Kasulis in his book *Intimacy or Integrity* (2002) is particularly useful to explain how different worldviews might influence the way DSI is understood and practised. It was developed as a comparative philosophy study considering different orientations in Western and Eastern culture; although my aim is not to conduct a comparative study of Eastern and Western approaches to relationships in DSI, Kasulis's heuristic is an appropriate lens to observe both my practice in Italy and the experience of DSI practitioners working in the Asia Pacific region.

Kasulis presents two fundamentally different ways of relating: although a society is rarely "culturally monolithic", it may have a mainstream system of thought that values 'integrity' over 'intimacy' or vice versa (Kasulis 2002, p. 17). Integrity-dominant models of knowledge have been emphasised in the West, while Eastern thought is characterised by an intimacy orientation.

The 'integrity' orientation poses an emphasis on public objectivity, independence, and external relations. In this orientation, the two entities participating in a relationship remain clearly distinct; the formation of their relationship is guided by an external set of principles or values, for example, respecting the autonomy and independence of all parties involved in a relationship. Parties maintain their 'integrity' outside of and within the relationship. Figure 2.1 further illustrates this point: the two parties 'A' and 'B' retain their integrity, and the relationship 'R' between them is universally applicable between any two or more subjects.

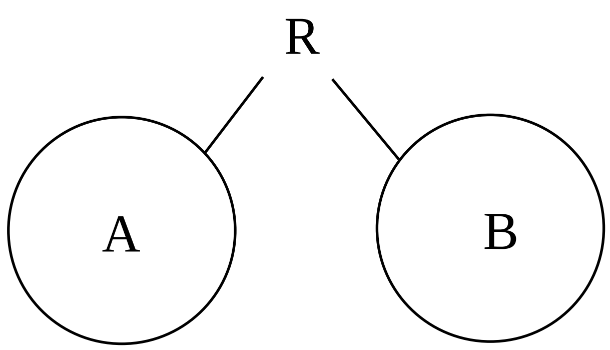

*Figure 2.2 Diagram illustrating a relationship in the integrity orientation (adapted from Kasulis, 2002, p. 37)*

The integrity orientation approaches the construction of knowledge in a similar way. It can be identified in Modernism, and traced back through the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, to Aristotle and Plato (Kasulis, 2002). Within an integrity orientation, the knower is seen to be independent from the known; any knower can attain the same knowledge, provided they have access to its rules and principles. Knowledge should be publicly shared so that it is available to all, and it should be empirical, verifiable, logical. To know means to be able to explain the principles and rationale behind the knowledge.

The ‘intimacy’ orientation, on the other hand, emphasises interdependence, belong-togetherness, and external relations. Those participating in a relationship are not clearly distinct: the relationship happens in their overlap and engages their innermost feelings, thoughts, and identity. Discovering, preserving, and enhancing commonalities is paramount to the relationship: in Figure 2.2, ‘A’ and ‘B’ are interdependent, so that one is also partly the other and the relationship cannot be severed without both losing a part of their identity.

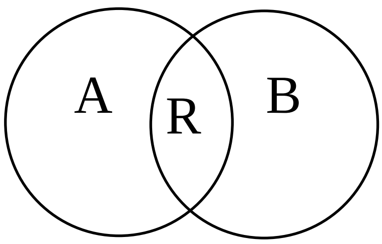


*Figure 2.3 Diagram illustrating a relationship in the intimacy orientation (adapted from Kasulis, 2002, p. 37)*

The intimacy approach to knowledge follows this pattern: the knower and the known cannot be separated, because knowledge is internal to the relationship between them, not in an external set of principles or rules. An intimacy paradigm perceives knowledge as embodied, inseparable from its context, deeply personal, tacit, affective, intuitive, and only transferable through relationships and situated practice. Table 2.1 below summarises the main characteristics of integrity and intimacy orientations.

*Table 2.1 General characteristics of Integrity and Intimacy (adapted from Kasulis, 2002, p. 71)*

| **Characteristic** | **Integrity** | **Intimacy** |
|---|---|---|
| Basis of verification | Objective and public | Objective and non-public |
| Form of relationship | External | Internal |
| Affective component | No affect | Affectively charged |
| Somatic component | Not emphasised | Emphasised |
| Reflective nature of its ground | Bright and open (i.e., grounded in reason) | Dark and esoteric (i.e., not rational, not explainable) |

Foregrounding intimacy or integrity has profound influences on epistemology, on how rational arguments are constructed, on how reality is defined and explained. It also impacts on how aesthetics, ethics and politics are conceived and practised (Kasulis, 2002).

Akama and Yee (2016) have illustrated the significance of this framework for designing social innovation: design knowledge and theory that emerge from an integrity worldview are of the type presented in § 2.6, while § 2.7.2 provides some examples of the intimacy orientation's influence on DSI. Before considering these examples, however, I want to explain the rationale for turning my attention to the *Intimacy or Integrity* framework in this research.

The examples provided in § 2.6 illustrate the tendency of Western design, within an integrity system of thought, to universalise knowledge. In Kasulis's words: "In insisting that philosophy be 'universal', the dominant Western tradition shows its own historical and cultural roots. The insistence on universalisation boils down to one cultural philosophy trying to exclude the very possibility of another" (Kasulis, 2002, p. 16). As

Kasulis points out (ibid.), entirely rejecting the dominant mode of Western philosophy would be a mistake, as it eliminates the possibility of debate both inside and outside of the cultural group. Moreover, I do not think I would be capable of rejecting integrity altogether – after all, I grew up surrounded by, and replicating, this cultural orientation. I do recognise, however, that issues arise when integrity is considered a description of 'how things are', rather than a way to articulate a particular worldview. The *Intimacy or Integrity* framework encourages us to explore the following idea: the two cultural orientations might deem different characteristics of a phenomenon as the parts most deserving of attention and develop different ways to describe them and argue about them. Kasulis (2002, p. 22) posits that intimacy is already part of a Westerner's experience – just on the *periphery* of what they generally use as a focus for research. I believe the *Intimacy or Integrity* heuristic can help catch a glimpse of how relationships in DSI could be considered, interpreted, and argued about from different worldviews.

Examples of the intimacy orientation can be found in various contexts, cultures, and perspectives, some of which are described in the following section. However, it is important to note Kasulis's (2002) framework is not a universal lens and certainly has its limitations: namely, the author describes the concept of 'intimacy' with East Asian cultures in mind (particularly Japan). While in the next section (§ 2.7.2) I acknowledge the relevance of Indigenous thought and practices, and of other perspectives from the Global South, to investigating relational approaches to DSI, in this thesis I do not explore them in depth. These limitations are further acknowledged in § 11.4.

### 2.7.2 Examples of the intimacy orientation in DSI

The perspectives and propositions presented in this section have in common an intimate approach to design – one that emphasises internal relationships and embodied, situated knowledge. Many of these perspectives are also influenced by feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous thought.

Light (Akama & Light, 2018, 2015; Light, 2019, 2018b; Light & Akama, 2012) encourages to recognise our interconnectedness in design work and explores what a form of intimate design might look like in social innovation initiatives. Clarke et al. (2016) offer an account of a co-design process that emphasises the importance of the researchers’ positionality, reflexivity, and sensitivity to the design context and its specificities.

Akama (2015, 2017) foregrounds her Japanese culture and spirituality to pursue interrelatedness, for example by drawing on the Japanese philosophy of *Ma* (2015) as an attunement to the space ‘in-between’, a space of transformation and ‘becoming together’ that can “orientate us towards the intimate, helping us feel what it means to primarily reside in the between-ness and how co-designing is creating, transforming and becoming among all these influences we cannot ‘format’” (Akama, 2015, p. 264).

This idea of ‘between-ness’ is also present in the doctoral research of Muliaumaseali’i (2017) on the Samoan concept of space called *Va*, or the space ‘in-between’, and its significance for design and social change; Samoan writer Albert Wendt (1999, p. 402) articulates *Va* as “the space between the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things”.

Mohamad et al. (2015, 2018) explore a “heartware approach” to the sustainability of a watershed in a university campus by considering the plurality of non-tangible values that the campus community placed on nature, as well as their mutual relationship (2018, p. 3). The authors demonstrated how the integration between technological solutions (hardware), strategic management (software) and voluntary interventions by the local community, driven by shared values (heartware) was successful in achieving long-term resilience and sustainability.

Albarrán González (2020) proposes epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos, 2014), and particularly *Buen Vivir* (good living, collective well-being) as a paradigm for design research with Mayan people in Chiapas, Mexico. The research weaves key concepts and practices of *sentirpensar* (feeling-thinking or sensing-thinking), and *corazonar* (reasoning and feeling with the heart) with decolonial theory, design research and co-design from the Global South.

Escobar (2017) states that tools or technology produced by design initiate rituals, practices, and modes of being; essentially, as we design or world, we are designed by it (Willis, 2006, p. 80; see also Escobar, 2017, p. 133). Referencing Heidegger’s (1927) interest in the differentiation between ontic (referring to empirical, concrete beings), and ontological (referring to a deeper sense of being, not necessarily connected to tangible qualities), and building upon the work of Maturana and Varela, Fry, Winograd and Flores, Tonkinwise and others, Escobar composes a description of “ontologically oriented design” (2017, p. 132). This theory of design advocates for convivial, communal, relational ways of existing that include nonhuman beings and recognise their role in the design process, allowing for compassion, care, and mindfulness to enter the design domain (Escobar, 2017 p. 134). This kind of design is not about fabrication, but about “modes of revealing” (2017, p. 33), about “skilful disclosure” of new ways of being in the world (Spinosa et al., 1999, as cited in Escobar, 2017, p. 112).

## 2.8 DSI in a pluriversal paradigm

Sections 2.6 and 2.7 have considered the dominant paradigm of design, mostly developed within a Western/Global North worldview and characterised by an integrity orientation, and different paradigms of design, mostly developed within Eastern or Global South worldviews and characterised by an intimacy orientation.

As stated in § 2.7, problematising the dominance of one paradigm has the aim to open design theory and practice to a multiplicity of influences and cultures, configuring design as a pluriversal practice that operates on the basis of radical ontological difference (Escobar, 2017). While Kasulis (2002, p. 133) recognises that marginalised orientations are typically disempowered, and advocates for becoming “culturally bi-orientational” (2002, p. 156), his work does not specifically tackle the political and economic implications of dominant paradigms of design. However, a nascent but growing movement discussing design’s decolonisation is undertaking these issues from different perspectives and cultural stances.

The Decolonising Design Group provides a platform for discussion and experimentation, supporting the “radical transfiguration” of power structures of contemporary design studies and research and “providing an outlet for voices from the fringes, the voices of the marginal and the suppressed in design discourse” (Decolonising Design, 2016). Other scholars such as Tunstall (2013) and Onafuwa

(2018) reflect upon the imperialism of design, “white standards”, and “respectful design”.

Efforts to uphold non-Western paradigms of design also happen In Aotearoa New Zealand, where Ngā Aho, a network of Maori design professionals, and the introduction of *Te Aranga* design principles in the *Auckland Design Manual* contribute to affirm Indigenous values in the design field (Akama et al., 2019).

In the Asia Pacific region, the research network Designing Social Innovation Asia Pacific (DESIAP) brings together designers from all over the region to discuss DSI practices and question the tendency to adopt models from the US and Europe that might supplant local practices, traditions, and customs.

In Latin America, Arturo Escobar (2017) outlines principles for “autonomous design” as an affirmation of communities’ self-determination based relational life principles, against the threats of neoliberal capitalism and colonialism; Salazar and Borrero (2017) reflect upon “design with other names” to expand the ways in which design operates and relates to different worldviews.

In a DRS keynote debate titled *Whose design?* (Product Design UL, 2018), Sadie Red Wing, a Lakota and Dakota graphic designer, highlights that Indigenous people are rarely acknowledged as designers, unless they mimic other cultures and relinquish the idea of doing design in their cultural terms; in academia, adds Arturo Escobar, non-scientific, feeling-thinking, embodied knowledge is often dismissed and not considered a valuable, trustworthy, and valid source.

The role of design research to produce “slippage” and resist conformity to dominant design paradigms (Yee, Akama, et al., 2017) is challenged by the lack of recognition that the knowledge stemming from an intimacy orientation is reliable and accurate. The result is a vicious cycle: a lack of clarity around what the agency of design is to challenge complex power relations does not facilitate the development of alternative design paradigms (Canli & Prado de O. Martins, 2016). However, clarity can be gained only through experimentation, which is often dismissed by education institutions as it does not conform to practice in the dominant paradigm.

Design within a pluriversal paradigm – one that does not uphold Western design standards as universal while simultaneously dismissing other approaches, and considers the intimacy orientation and relational approaches as essential – emerges as a current and pressing challenge for design research and practice, and its intersection with social innovation practices and initiatives is currently underexplored. As Ansari notes (in Schultz et al., 2018, p. 84), "[t]o think beyond modernity from within modernity is not an easy task"; it is no surprise that researchers operating in the dominant paradigm encounter difficulties in envisioning what designing within different paradigms might look like in practice. While Nold (2018) laments the lack of specificity and pragmatism in Escobar's vision of ontological design, Abdulla (in Schultz et al., 2018, p. 89) warns about the risk of simplifying a pluriversal approach, thus stripping it of its criticality. Between basing our transition to pluriversal, relational design exclusively on moral or theoretical grounds and sterilising the design process in the name of pragmatism, lies the possibility to build rich narratives of situated practices of design. These would account for designers, their background, their story, their worldview; they would situate them in the design context, interrogating the socio-cultural values that drive design decisions and accounting for shifts in perspective as their worldview encounters other ways of being, thinking and doing.

## 2.9 Summary of literature review

This chapter has presented key concepts for this thesis: social innovation; designing social innovation (DSI); the main characteristics of relationships (and particularly professional relationships); emerging themes in relational DSI; and the impact and influence of different paradigms of design.

Social innovation has been defined as stemming from relationships and creating new relationships, highlighting the importance of relationality for the discipline. Designing social innovation (with its many names) denotes activities within a social innovation process that use design methods, tools and approaches; it has emerged as a valid field of research and practice, however relationality – and particularly its interpersonal, affective dimensions – is still under-researched in this area.

Drawing from different disciplines, this chapter has offered different definitions of relationships, and particularly work relationships. These involve behavioural, cognitive, and affective aspects; rely on interdependence; see parties assume different roles and establish common objectives and goals. Key aspects of relationships introduced here, in preparation for further discussion in relevant chapters, are mutuality, reciprocity, trust, and relational identity.

The chapter has also reviewed the significance of relationships in DSI, identifying four emerging themes. Firstly, the centrality of the designer's role in DSI processes appears to be in question, as design becomes increasingly participatory and collaborative. Secondly, the work aimed to construct a relational 'infrastructure' for a DSI project often happens in the 'backstage' of the design process and remains unseen or invisible. Thirdly, the inner, affective dimension of relationships in DSI is increasingly researched, with results highlighting the contextuality and unpredictability of interactions. Lastly, a growing interest for non-rationalist approaches to relationships and intersubjectivity in DSI processes highlight their incongruity with conventional design thinking methods and tools. These four themes identify a space for exploration of the role and the identity of the designer, of particular and often overlooked relational dynamics in DSI, and of how DSI is thought and practised with different worldviews.

Finally, this chapter has presented different paradigms of design. The dominant paradigm of design upholds Western practices as a standard of quality, presenting design as a problem definition and problem solving activity, focusing on replicability and scalability of design solution and on the universal applicability of design methods. In Kasulis's *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002), this paradigm is coherent with the integrity orientation, which values objectivity and public knowledge, external relations, and logical reasoning.

Other paradigms of design foreground contextual specificity; reflect on the researcher's positionality; value affect, sensing, intuition; and centre care, mindfulness, and conviviality. In Kasulis's (2002) framework, these paradigms stem from an intimacy orientation, which values lived experience, 'esoteric', somatic, affectively charged knowledge, and internal relations.

Academics and practitioners in the field of designing social innovation are increasingly interested in a 'relational approach' to design; however, the paradigm in which design currently operates does not seem to enable the understanding of certain aspects of relationality. By weaving together narratives from different cultural orientations on relationships and DSI, this thesis aims to better understand the significance of relationships for this field of research and practice, and encourage further exploration.

Having identified the themes and issues that frame this research, I now describe the methodological approach selected for investigating them.

# Chapter 3. Methodology

This research draws on my practice in three different contexts to investigate relational approaches in designing social innovation (DSI). I use reflective practice and autobiographical methods to document and reflect on my actions. These data are enriched and challenged by ten interviews with practitioners working in Asia Pacific, which also include, in one instance, a follow-up field visit to observe their practice directly (see Fig. 3.1).

This chapter describes the methodological approaches selected to most appropriately reflect the research aims and activities. Firstly (§ 3.1) I outline the inquiry paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994): a constructivist epistemological perspective, based on a constructionist ontology. Section 3.2 briefly illustrates the practice-based element of the study (a detailed description of the contexts of practice can be found in Chapter 4). Here, I explain why I combined a phenomenological approach to research with reflexive (auto)ethnography and reflective practice. I also detail how participants in the study from the Asia Pacific region were sampled, how the data were collected, and I reflect on my positionality in relation to the data collection. Section 3.3 discusses the methods of analysis used in this research and the rationale for choosing them, while § 3.4 illustrates how the data were validated through dialogue with participants.

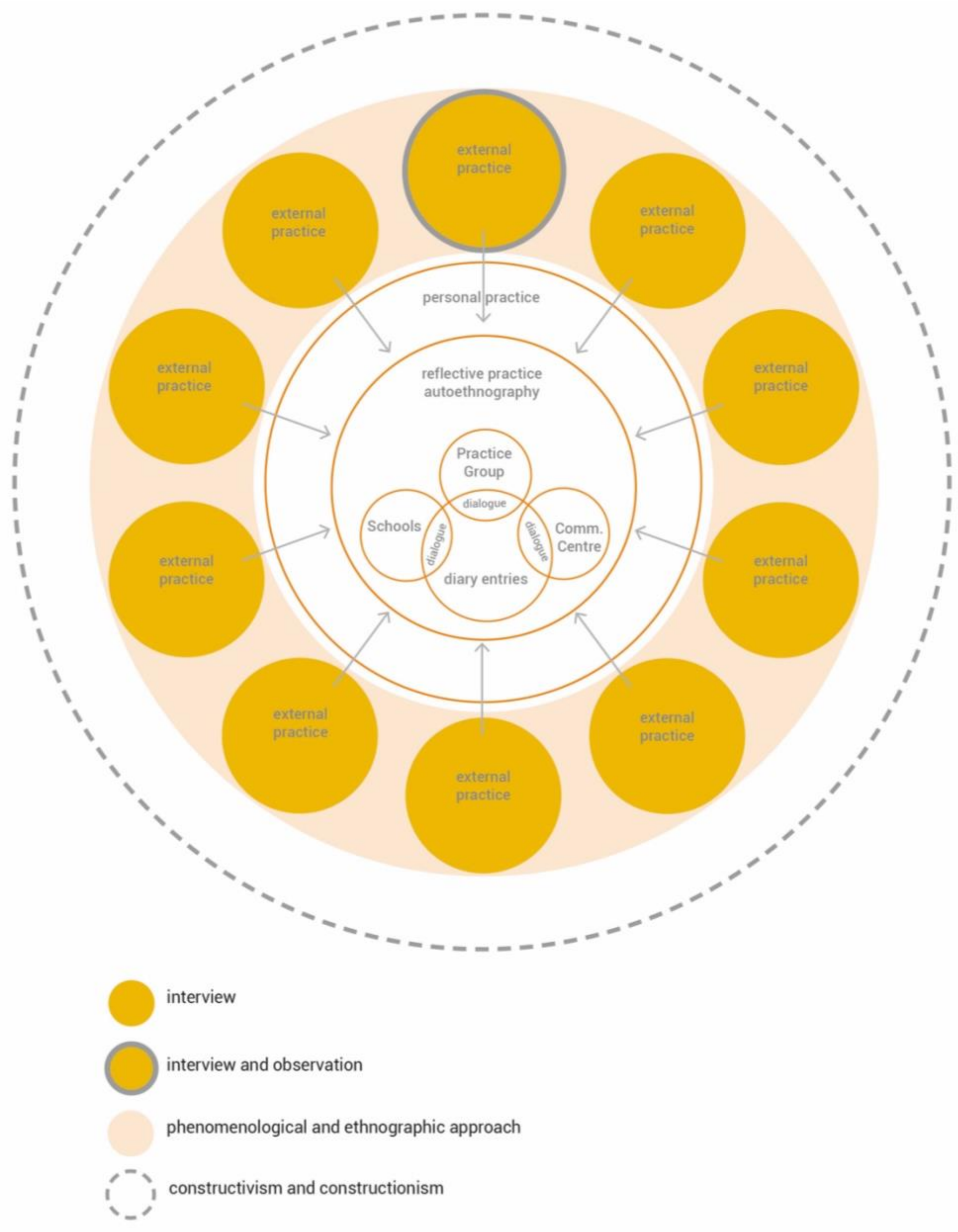


*Figure 3.1 Methodology diagram showing theoretical perspective, strategy, and methods*

## 3.1 Epistemology and theoretical perspective

Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 107) define paradigms as "basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions". In a research context, an inquiry paradigm defines what falls within and outside of the research's scope. Three fundamental questions guide the definition of the inquiry paradigm: what the form and nature of reality are ('ontology'), what is the relationship between the (would-be) knower and what would be known ('epistemology'), and how the inquirer would go about the research ('methodology').

This research is framed within a constructionist ontology and a constructivist paradigm of knowledge. Constructionism asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are produced by social actors and are in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). It contrasts with the objectivist perspective, which implies the existence of an objective reality and the possibility of discovering its nature. Constructionist research emphasises subjectively constructed meanings and questions their generalisation (Feast, 2010), thus lending itself to qualitative research. This study has taken a qualitative approach to account for experiences of relationship building in DSI; the emphasis on reflexivity, the focus on process, and the attention given to multiple and diverse perspectives therefore align best with a constructionist position.

Constructivist epistemology is rooted in the idea that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences through interaction and negotiation with other persons. Experiences are mediated by historical and cultural norms and are thus grounded in relationship with context and people (Crotty, 1998). A constructivist paradigm challenges the distinction between ontology and epistemology, considering what can be known as inseparable from the interaction between a particular investigator and the object of the investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This view is in contrast with the positivist paradigm, which is concerned with explaining reality as concrete and objective (Spencer et al., 2014, p. 83) and assumes researchers as able to have a neutral stance (Bryant, 2014, p. 122). The aim of this study is to construct a multi-faceted, pluralistic account of relational approaches to DSI, accounting for my positionality not only as a researcher, but also as a design practitioner operating in a cultural paradigm and carrying my own beliefs, values and assumptions into a research and design process; the nature of this research therefore aligns best with a constructivist perspective.

## 3.2 Strategy and approach

In this research, I collect and analyse two types of data. The first is related to the construction and maintenance of relationships in my personal practice as a designer in three different contexts of practice (see § 3.2.1). The second source of data are external DSI practices in organisations from different countries in the Asia Pacific region (see § 3.2.2). I use reflective practice – with reflexive ethnography and autoethnographic methods – to document my personal practice and narrate my shift in perspective as I engage with DSI initiatives operating within a relational paradigm. These are investigated with a phenomenological and ethnographic approach.

### 3.2.1 Personal practice

This research is practice-led in that it aims to advance knowledge about and within practice. 'Practice-led' research identifies a relatively recent form of design research conducted by a researcher who is also a practitioner. 'Practice-based' research is another widely used term, although some find differences between the two methods (Nimkulrat, 2007). Candy (2006) has identified practice-led research as leading to knowledge that has operational significance for that practice and that can be fully understood without referring to the tangible outcomes of creative work. This is different from practice-based research, where originality and contribution to knowledge are demonstrated by the production of a specific outcome (such as an artifact or a performance).

Based on this distinction, practice-led research seems the most fitting for the objectives of this thesis: to gain new understandings about practice by maintaining and documenting a personal practice, informed by experiences in different contexts and cultures, and surfacing those elements of relationships that are normally taken for granted in design processes. Now, I briefly introduce the contexts of practice and then describe the methodological approach linking design practice to research.

### Contextualisation of the design practice

My design practice sees my engagement in two projects in my hometown, in Italy, and with an online, peer group practising methods and tools for community building and mutual aid.

The first context of practice (described in detail in § 4.2) consists of a consulting engagement with a private organisation. The organisation was the leading proponent of a three-year project aiming to experiment with different educational approaches in a local context. Within this project, I was involved in a specific action centred upon the (re)design of spaces and services in 11 middle schools aimed at students between 11 and 14 years old. Each school participated with two classes and a varying number of professors and was granted a small budget. My role in the project was to structure and guide the design process together with a senior colleague (referred to with the pseudonym Dario) who also wrote the project proposal and coordinated the whole project. Dario works in local development and has a great deal of experience in devising and managing multi-stakeholder social projects; he was not formally trained as a designer. We have previous experience of working together and our skills are quite complementary. He involved me in this project from the proposal development stage in 2017, as he did with many other project partners; my engagement in the project was formalised in 2018, when I joined the project staff in the role of designer and co-coordinator of the action described above. In our engagement with schools, Dario and I used participatory design methods and tools to co-design interventions with teachers and students, mediating between them and making sure the project reflected their needs and aspirations and had their continued support and approval. My relationship with Dario became a place for dialogical reflection and observation of specific relational dynamics.

The second context of practice (described in detail in § 4.3) consists of my engagement, as a volunteer, in a network of community centres in my hometown. These are affiliated to a national organisation supporting the tradition of People's Houses, community hubs and mutualistic grass-roots movements. Affiliates in the same province are encouraged to coordinate, cooperate, and organise shared initiatives promoting equality, solidarity, social justice, and free access to culture. I was invited to facilitate the meetings of a group in charge of creating a cultural programme for one of the community centres. During this experience, I identified elements relevant to the research – particularly the complex web of relationships sustaining the community centres, volunteer work being based on reciprocity, and the existence of largely implicit power imbalances. I built relationships with group members, and particularly with one volunteer (referred to with the pseudonym Greta) who was deeply engaged in enabling collaborative work and had a formal role in the community centre. Therefore, I identified the working group, and the core relationship with Greta in particular, as a site for research and personal reflection.

The third context of practice (described in detail in § 4.4) is a peer-group practice (here referred to as the Practice Group) that began after its four members and I participated in the same online training programme focused on practising methods and tools for community building relying on peer-to-peer support and mutual aid. After the training, we continued meeting online for 10 months (including during some of the lockdowns and isolation periods imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic). The Practice Group allowed me to examine and explore relationship building, specific relational dynamics, and the impact of certain methods, tools, and approaches on dyadic and group relationships. My interactions with the Practice Group supported a personal and collective reflection on how I build and maintain relationships in my practice.

**Reflective practice**

In this research, I approach my practice reflectively: I consider my feelings, experiences, and thoughts about what is happening in the design process and cultivate awareness of the evolution of relations. Reflective practice requires an ongoing reflection of what constitutes my ‘practice’ and what I consider to be part of the ‘design process’.

As discussed by Kimbell (2011), designers often see their engagement with different dimensions of a project as being all part of the design process, rather than confining design to a specific part of the project. In Cau and Maino’s (2017) framework for collaborative social innovation projects, participatory design tools and facilitation techniques are interwoven, across all phases of the project, with project management principles and communication tactics. The authors argue there are two interconnected kinds of project: the “partnership project” frames the context where relationships are built and the meaning of collective action is negotiated, resulting in the “action project” (Cau & Maino, 2017, p. 35). In this view, design activity is not limited to a specific part of the project but is entangled with all aspects of it; design both supports and is supported by other activities such as management or communication.

Furthermore, Light and Akama (2012) argue that participatory design methods and techniques require embodiment, that is, they cannot be separated from the people enacting them. Design is intertwined with the circumstances of all those taking part in it, so that outcome, process, and people are inseparable; pre-existing and new relationships are embedded in the design process and influence the way the project is received, understood, developed, and adopted in a myriad of interactions that happen not only in workshops or co-design sessions, but also in the ‘backstage’ of the design process (Dindler & Iversen, 2014; see § 2.4.2).

Framing design practice and design processes this way highlights the importance, for design practitioners and facilitators, to make do with what is available in ways that are inevitably improvisational (Light & Miskelly, 2008). Reflexivity plays a key role in this process. The seminal book *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983) exposed the tacit knowledge that informs designers’ actions, and how reflective practice allows practitioners to make it explicit. Reflection-in-action enables designers to gain developmental insight as they interact, observe, and engage productively with others. This approach is often seen in opposition to the more ‘rational’ tradition of design thinking as a problem-solving activity (Simon, 1969) and has become a standard reference for Participatory Design practitioners (Bannon & Ehn, 2013).

Observing design students engaged in a “reflective practicum” that involves learning by doing with the help of coaching, Schön (1987, p. xii) identified “reciprocal reflection-in-action” as a form of dialogue between coach and student aimed at “convergence of meaning” (1987, p. 102) and an increased capacity to design with competence. In this study, reflection in-action and on-action often happened in dialogue with colleagues and collaborators where we interpreted each other’s utterances and actions, revealing meanings we constructed for them and attempting to bridge gaps and navigate ambiguity as we engaged in a process of mutual learning.

This research employs reflection-in-action and on-action (often done 'reciprocally' in dialogue with colleagues and collaborators) to explore my attitude towards the construction and maintenance of relationships in a DSI project. It focuses on core relationships (all names were changed to protect the participants' anonymity):

- The one with my senior colleague Dario, that enabled me to build a connection with teachers (who had a gatekeeping role, being the main contact persons within each school) and other project partners
- The one with fellow volunteer Greta, that enabled me to better understand the context of the community centres and be connected to other volunteers
- The one with members of the Practice Group, that enabled me to reflect on relationships of reciprocal support and mutual aid while building those relationships in an online setting.

The research focuses on aspects of my practice that are more directly associated with design – for example co-design sessions and workshops, and design sessions with Dario or Greta – as well as on aspects that relate to the construction and maintenance of work relationships, such as conversations and long-distance communication (email, phone calls, video calls). Specifically, the research investigates my shift in perspective towards relationships in DSI, as I engage with these contexts of practice informed by other DSI initiatives and practitioners who operate with a relational paradigm (see § 3.2.2).

**Autobiographical elements: reflexive ethnography and autoethnography**

This study is centred upon my personal practice in social innovation projects in my hometown and my participation in a peer-group, while drawing attention to practices from Asia Pacific contexts and cultures. It describes the process of building relationships in DSI and defining my position, as a designer, within specific relational dynamics, as I consider different paradigms of design that foreground relationality. Therefore, this thesis has a substantial autobiographical element; I looked for an adequate methodological approach to document and analyse my shift in perspective, weaving it with the analysis and discussion of the perspectives of practitioners in Asia Pacific (which are introduced in § 3.3.2).

My goal was to develop a method that would "fully acknowledge and utilize [my] subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research" (Davies, 2008, p. 5). Yet, I recognise that my reflexivity is not a purely subjective phenomenon but could be more properly viewed as a relational activity (Davies, 2008, p. 223) – it happens in interaction with colleagues, collaborators, and participants. Furthermore, in Willis's words (Willis, 2006, p. 80), "we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us": I expected this research project to 'design me' by deconstructing paradigms of knowledge and belief, introducing new elements to my design practice, and questioning my role as a designer in DSI processes. The approach adopted in this thesis is informed by reflexive ethnography (Davies, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002) and autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Reflexive ethnography is "that ethnographic form that privileges the presence of the writer in the text" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 1). The ethnographer uses their experience "reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). It emphasises moral and political self-awareness, often expressed in a first-person voice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. xii).

The concept of 'autoethnography' is described by Gregory and Reed-Danahay (2000) as having two interconnected meanings. On one hand, it can be described as the ethnography of one's own group; on the other, it refers to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest (Gregory & Reed-Danahay, 2000, p. 2). Ellis (2004) has defined autoethnography as the process of weaving fieldwork findings with the analysis of personal experiences; doing so, researchers alternate between focusing outward with an ethnographic lens and looking inward, investigating the personal and its relationship to culture. Autoethnographic texts "[function] as an agent of self-discovery or self-creation for the author as well as for those who read and engage [them]" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746); the method foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity and "[a]cknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 1). Adams et al. stress that in autoethnography, how a text is represented is inseparable from its content (2015, p. 83). The authors discuss several approaches to representing autoethnography and describe their differences in terms of the researcher's objectives, the use of first, second, or third-person voice, and the proportion between storytelling and analysis. They specify, however, that the categories they offer are not fixed or exhaustive.

During this research, I experimented with different writing methods. I used more 'evocative' autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) written in first-person voice to recall episodes from the past, such as the beginning of the project Dario and I worked on together, or to make sense of my shift in perspective. This type of writing was essential to identifying salient incidents (as further discussed in § 5.2) and examples of it can be found in the Appendix. Chapters 6-10, which present the Framework for Relational Literacy, are written in an analytical, reporting style that weaves together fieldwork, interviews, analysis, and experiences and conversations with my colleagues and collaborators.

**Tools and methods to capture my experience**

Initially I had decided to record my narrative about the design process in a research diary (Nadin & Cassell, 2006; Ortlipp, 2008). I saw this as not just a way to mechanically store information about what was taking place, but also as a way to have an ongoing conversation with myself about my shift in perspective as the research progressed. There are no rules in terms of how research diaries should be compiled: it is up to the researcher's discretion to find a format that suits the project. During the first months of the project (from October 2018 to June 2019), I focused on finding a style that would suit my needs. I soon realised that recording entries right after a meeting was impossible: I was exhausted and therefore dreaded writing; after meetings in schools, my colleague and I needed to get on the road quickly as some of the schools we were working with were more than an hour away from the city; the meetings at the community centre were often followed by informal chat, sharing food or drinks, walking or carpooling home with other volunteers and group members.

However, I noticed that after meetings in schools, during the ride home, my colleague Dario and I would ask each other for feedback. During the conversation, we would strategise about future engagements with the school, the pupils, and the teachers; we would discuss the methods and tools we used, our feelings and our level of energy during the co-design sessions, etcetera. With time, this reflection in form of a dialogue gained importance in our collaboration; we would often reference the ‘car conversations’ during our formal project meetings, and even ended up including some of our car rides in the financial report of the project as we felt that these chats were, in fact, an integral part of our work. I therefore started recording these sessions and pairing the re-listening of the recordings with written or audio-recorded reflection. This pattern continued even when, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, all our activities moved online: although we could not have our ‘car conversations’, Dario and I tended to stay in online meetings after everyone else had disconnected to give each other feedback and exchange views.

My work with Greta followed a similar pattern. Although a significant portion of our interactions took place during the pandemic, and thus happened in an online, remote work context, we either prolonged our video calls to unwind and review how the group meeting went, or we followed up with each other in the following days. We also kept in touch regularly through phone calls and text messages and met up for coffee whenever the pandemic-related regulations allowed it. Over time, the line between our personal and professional relationship became increasingly blurred. I periodically reviewed our exchanges in my diary, reflecting upon the evolution of our relationship and its impact on the project.

The Practice Group gave me the opportunity to further reflect through dialogue; through an intense activity of collaborative note taking, the whole group kept track of topics discussed, our reflections, our emotions. I kept a printed copy of our shared notes and periodically reviewed it, documenting thoughts and reflections in my diary.

These three opportunities for dialogue, exchange and collaborative reflection formed the base for my personal reflection, my shift in perspective and my process of transformation. I supported the handwritten reviews in my diary with audio recorded reflections, mind maps and “reflective doodling” (Wallace, 2020) done during and after conversations.

Having described my approach to the documentation and analysis of personal practice, I now briefly contextualise external DSI practices and describe the methodological choices adopted in their regard.

### 3.2.2 External DSI practices

To commence the project, I searched and reviewed the literature to understand how the intersections between relationships, design and social innovation were described and theorised (see Chapter 2). I noticed that few publications were focused on the relational aspects of design. Those that did often came from non-Western or Global South contexts often foregrounding intimacy, relationality, interdependence, reciprocity, and rootedness in context and describing them with a multiplicity of terms, perspectives, and stories. However, it was unclear what their significance would be for designers (including myself) engaging in the development of a relational approach to DSI. I therefore began to seek opportunities to interact with DSI initiatives from non-Western contexts foregrounding relationality, to develop different lenses to interrogate my practice.

In considering DSI initiatives and my interactions with practitioners, I adopted a phenomenological and ethnographic approach (Harrison, 2014; Spencer et al., 2014). Rooted in the work of Husserl in the early 1900s, phenomenology aims "to understand the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of [a] phenomenon for a particular individual or for many individuals" (Christensen et al., 2014, p. 370). The researcher's task is to reveal the hidden assumptions that guide people in making sense of certain events and phenomena. To do so, the researcher must first uncover the biases that make up her perspective (Spencer et al., 2014). 'Bracketing' or 'epoché' (Husserl, 1960) (the process of setting aside preliminary ideas and concepts about a phenomenon) is a key concept in phenomenology, but its relevance for the application of phenomenology in disciplines such as anthropology or design has been discussed (Maso, 2012) and questioned (Zahavi, 2021). In my experience in this research, cultivating an awareness of the tension between the participants' perspectives and my own perspective as a researcher helped me avoid taking at face value what appeared familiar or obvious just because my background assumptions gave it apparent sense (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p. 231).

Ethnography is a particularly relevant method for those coming to research with a phenomenological approach (Spencer et al., 2014). However, there is considerable debate around whether ethnography should be considered an overarching philosophical paradigm, or a method for researchers to use as appropriate. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p. 248) list some common features of ethnographic research: the explorative nature of the approach, the tendency to work with unstructured data rather than with predetermined categories, a smaller number of participants or case studies, a strong focus on interpretive analysis. Another feature of ethnography is the use of observation as a means of research (Gobo, 2015). As noted by Maso (2011), the concept of phenomenological bracketing has significant overlaps with the concept of ‘estrangement’, widely used in anthropology and ethnography to make explicit the assumptions that are normally taken for granted as members of a culture. Even when researching a familiar setting, the observer is required to treat it as ‘anthropologically strange’ to elicit reconsideration of normalised thoughts and behaviours in a certain paradigm (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Schütz, 1944). ‘Making the familiar strange’ by discussing or observing a familiar activity (relationship building) with or among practitioners who operate within a different, relational paradigm or worldview, I aimed to develop a different understanding of relationships in DSI and nuance my perspective.

**Semi-structured interviews**

Interviewing has been described as a “conversation with purpose” (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, p. 157). In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions, but the interview has a conversational style and participants can elaborate upon the topics they deem important (Longhurst, 2010).

During the initial data collection, I conducted a total of 11 semi-structured interviews with 12 practitioners working in 10 organisations from different countries in the Asia Pacific region. The organisations encompass a wide range of activities including funding, supporting, and researching the design and delivery of social innovation initiatives. The objective for the interviews was to begin the exploration of relationships in DSI by investigating their importance for practitioners, what a successful or positive relationship looks like for them, what challenges they face in building relationships as part of their work, and methods or techniques they use to foster relationships. Through the interviews, I also aimed to identify organisations to engage with through participant observation of DSI processes (without the intention of leading any activity) and through further interviews and informal conversations with project participants and other stakeholders.

### Interview sampling strategy

The sampling began with the construction of a database of potential contacts who could offer a non-Western perspective on designing social innovation. The selection was based on the following criteria:

- Expertise of the interviewee in the social innovation field and perceived interest in the questions guiding this research
- Likelihood that the interviewee would have an approach to their work that emphasises the importance of relationships
- Previous contact, or possibility of being introduced.

My research supervisor, Dr. Joyce Yee, is co-founder of DESIAP (Designing Social Innovation Asia Pacific) and has developed many contacts in the Asia Pacific region. This was a great opportunity for me to access a database of contacts to whom I could be introduced. Most of the contacts were collected from this database, except for two people I recruited from my professional contacts in Asia Pacific.

I recruited another five participants among my colleagues in Italy to conduct a pilot study; initial interviews with them allowed me to check if I was asking the right questions, whether I was able to fit into the expected interview time of 50 minutes to one hour, and generally to get familiar with the interview process. The data from these interviews were not included in the analysis.

### Interview structure and data collection

The interviews with practitioners in Asia Pacific were conducted one-to-one, except for one case where two people running the same organisation asked to be interviewed together. I designed an interview guide (Kvale, 1996) to stimulate conversation and encourage the interviewees to share their views and practices in DSI (a copy of the interview guide can be found in the Appendix). Together with the consent form and an information sheet, I sent the guide to the participants via email 1-2 weeks before the interview. We then had a VOIP (voice over IP) call through Skype or Zoom, with each conversation lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes depending on the availability of the practitioner and on the time spent in introductions and informal chat. More detail on interview-based data collection is provided in § 4.5.1.

#### Participant observation

Between December 2019 and January 2020, I also engaged in field research in Thailand and Malaysia, with the collaboration and support of one participant in this research. Details of data collection are provided in § 4.5; here, I outline the methodological choices that guided the fieldwork.

Participant observation is a widely used tool for data collection in ethnographic research (Gobo, 2015; Kawulich, 2005). Schensul and LeCompte (2012, p. 83) define it as a learning process happening through exposure and involvement in the usual, daily activities of participants. This includes observation, natural conversations, and semi-structured interviews (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Participant observation enabled me to observe situations participants had described during our conversations, including non-verbal expressions and interactions with other people. It also gave me the chance to interview or have informal conversations with the organisations' project partners and collaborators. These interactions culminated in the collaborative construction of a map of relationships; together with the interviews and observations, building the map with participants allowed me to enrich and validate the data for analysis and to get a better sense of what actual relationships lay under the vague notion of a 'local community' of social innovators. It also provided participants with an invitation to self-reflect on the relational structures they weaved as part of their daily activities. More details on the creation of the map and its significance for this research are provided in § 4.5.1 and § 9.2.1.

### 3.2.3 Acknowledging limitations and reflecting on reciprocity, identity, and voice

I acknowledge the data gathering techniques described above (observation, interviews, collaborative mapping) have limitations, and that several factors influenced my access to the data. Generally speaking, the appearance, languages spoken, class background, educational level, manners, age, gender, and ethnicity of the researcher, along with structural characteristics such as local customs or how much she is trusted by participants, are all factors that potentially play a role in interactions with participants (Schensul and LeCompte, 2012). I was not a neutral instrument for data collection and my characteristics affected what information I could access as well as the analysis and the interpretation of the data (Kawulich, 2005).

Ethical issues are present in any kind of research. A number of principles are usually listed for researchers to abide by: minimizing harm, respecting people's autonomy, and preserving their privacy. Some procedures, such as securing informed consent, are also frequently used (Traianou, 2014). These principles and procedures are fundamental and define the basic standards for ethical research. However, guidance on how to navigate the contextual subtleties of qualitative research in interaction with participants is more elusive. Kvale (1996, p. 121) refers to a "virtue ethics of skills" model that questions the articulation of abstract principles and emphasises a situational approach to ethics, where the researcher's intuitions, feelings, and reflexivity guide ethical decisions. Another perspective comes from feminist approaches to ethics (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 20) that emphasise care and responsibility over outcomes, justice, or rights. The two approaches have some overlaps, with the key difference that an emphasis on 'virtue skills' might ultimately point to impartial notions of 'good' research standards, while the feminist attention for care inevitably roots ethical choices in the specificity of each relationship. I cultivated situational awareness and a caring approach to guide my ethical choices in this research. In some instances, this meant I chose not to inquire further, push or pry. This is evident in § 9.2.1, where I reflect on my positionality with regards to the intimate relationships I was invited to observe as an outsider during the field research.

Given the sensitive, deeply personal topic of this research – interpersonal relationships – it is also appropriate to reflect on issues of reciprocity, rapport, identity, and voice. These topics, along with debates on how much researchers should reveal about themselves in an interview setting, have been a focus of feminist research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). During the interviews, I chose to share my experiences with the interviewees and answer their questions. I did not do this in the assumption that, by building rapport, I would get to some core knowledge or a 'real self' I could access through relational skills (Dingwall, 1997), but because – aligning with the constructive paradigm of this research – I acknowledge that meanings of questions and answers are co-constructed by the researcher and the participant (Schwandt, 1997) and that interviews and interviewers are not neutral tools, but are "part of the interaction they seek to study, and influence that interaction" (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Like in many research contexts, I – as the researcher – mostly set the conditions for interviewing, initiated the questioning, followed my research interest, and interpreted the data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Kvale, 1996), which meant the power distribution in the interview setting was asymmetrical (Anyan, 2013). Disclosing personal views and experiences was therefore a way to propose a dialogue or create a "conversational space" (Owens, 2006) where participants could feel safe to share their experiences and lifeworld. Though I acknowledge that shared similarities, or differences, do not guarantee mutual understanding or a 'better' exchange (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008, p. 334), I saw dialogue as a way to explore the dynamic between the different 'selves' or identities the participants and I brought to the research and design process (Reinharz, 1997). I also recognise that the practitioners' motivations for participating in a research project played a role in the construction of meaning and in the unfolding of the interaction between us: Hiller and DiLuzio (2004) observe that the researcher's interest in a participant's experience confirms its significance and allows the participant to talk about it, relating it to an arena of practitioners with similar experiences.

## 3.3 Data analysis

In this section I discuss the methods of analysis used in this research. I had initially opted for a Grounded Theory (GT) methodology – particularly with Charmaz's (2006) constructive perspective – but I realised it was not the best approach to seek answers to my research questions. I am not trying to formulate an explanatory theory of a social process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as much as I am trying to develop a deeper understanding of relational dynamics through rich descriptions and the exposure of taken-for-granted assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this sense, a phenomenological approach to research (Spencer et al., 2014) paired with Thematic

Analysis (TA) method seems more fitting (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2016, 2019). Though GT and TA have some similarities, GT stems from a specific theoretical position and has limited flexibility in terms of how it is applied. TA is more versatile and can be applied across different epistemological and theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There are different approaches to Thematic Analysis. I have adopted the "reflexive" approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; Braun et al., 2019) which conceptualises TA as wholly qualitative (unlike 'coding reliability' approaches which are influenced by a positivist paradigm – e.g., Boyatzis, 1998). In reflexive TA, the emphasis is on situated, contextual meaning within multiple realities, with the researcher having an active role in the production of meaning and knowledge. The researcher engages with the data by coding, an organic and iterative process of pattern identification aiming to "move beyond the surface or obvious content of the data and to identify implicitly or unexpected unifying patterns of meaning" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848). These patterns are named 'themes'; they go through repeated processes of revision and reformulation aimed at refining them and avoiding conceptual overlap and vagueness. In this process, they may also be arranged into thematic maps depicting the "overall story" of the data (Braun et al. 2019, p. 856) and they are eventually organised into a coherent report of the results. The interplay between my reflective practice and the analysis of the data collected through interactions with external DSI practices led to the construction of a Framework to support reflective relational practice which I have named Framework for Relational Literacy. The analysis process is described in detail in Chapter 5, while Chapters 6-10 guide through a description of the Framework for Relational Literacy and its themes.

## 3.4 Validation of the results

It is a common claim that qualitative research lacks objectivity. However, there is a lack of consensus on what objectivity is: it can be defined as an absence of personal bias, as consensus between different subjects about the same phenomenon, or as a property related to the nature of the observed object or phenomenon (Kvale, 1996). As described in § 3.2, this research views phenomena and their meanings as continuously co-constructed and negotiated by social actors and considers knowledge inseparable from the knower. For these reasons, the personal is not considered an invalidating factor, but rather an unavoidable aspect of qualitative research – one that enriches the results and makes it possible to identify details and nuances. A concern with the reliability and generalisability of observation would be incompatible with a fully qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 847), and therefore is not the focus of further steps in the analysis.

Noble and Smith (2015, p. 2) present alternative terminology, criteria and strategies to evaluate qualitative research findings, focusing on accurately representing the participants' perspectives by inviting them to comment on the concepts created ("truth value"); maintaining a clear decision trail ("consistency"); and considering whether findings can be applied to others ("applicability"). While I did elicit feedback from participants in the research to further refine the Framework for Relational Literacy, I should stress that these evaluation criteria were woven together with the construction of relationships with participants, particularly with colleagues and collaborators. Through dialogue, we were not trying to establish an absolute 'truth' about relationships in DSI, but to reciprocally adapt our understanding to reach an agreement about our particular relationships, about their specific terms, about our roles and identities within it. This also speaks to the applicability of the Framework for Relational Literacy: discussions on the Framework itself generated useful, meaningful conversations on our relational ties, supporting the construction of mutual understanding and ultimately leading to the conclusion that the Framework, to some level at least, resonated with the people involved. While maintaining consistency and a clear decision trail throughout the many challenges brought by the pandemic was not easy, the findings presented in the Framework for Relational Literacy have internal coherence and offer a nuanced account of different relational dynamics while highlighting the tensions of relational work.

In terms of the methods used to elicit feedback from initial participants, colleagues, and collaborators on the Framework, I proceeded as follows. To uniformly present the data, all participants were shown a short, pre-recorded video presentation of the current stage of development of the Framework (links are provided in the Appendix), after which they were invited into a conversation. Participants could also directly annotate the Framework using an online visual collaboration platform (Miro[1]).

Conversations with initial participants and those with colleagues Dario and Greta were held individually, while feedback from the Practice Group was collected through a focus group interview, to build on the group's established capacity for collective reflection and dialogue. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013, p. 337) explain that, while the role of focus groups is typically "to gauge the effects of prescribed and delimited messages, products, and practices", they can have multiple functions in research: a pedagogical function, highlighting the transformative nature of shared dialogue; a political function, framing focus groups as sources of collective support; and an empirical function, referring to the ability of focus groups to open up new questions, possibilities and ways of thinking. All these functions are coherent with the purpose and activity of the Practice Group, which focused on mutual support and on the development and expansion of single members' views through dialogue and exchange (a detailed description of my engagement with the group can be found in Chapter 4). Therefore, the focus group methodology seemed apt not only to elicit feedback from different people simultaneously, but also to test the potential of the Framework for Relational Literacy for generating rich conversation on relationships in a group setting.

Another form of peer-review (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 159) was the presentation of initial findings from the study to an audience of academics and designers at the Design Research Society's 2020 conference (Petrella et al., 2020; available in the Appendix). The review of the paper submitted for participation, the presentation and the following discussion provided the opportunity to gain feedback on the methodology, content, and description of the findings.

[1] http://miro.com

## 3.5 Summary of methodological approach

The ontological (constructionist) and epistemological (constructivist) perspectives constitute the philosophical basis for the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which takes a phenomenological and ethnographic approach (Harrison, 2014). The focus is on surfacing the meaning of lived experience for a particular individual or group by "making the familiar strange" (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007; Schütz, 1944) and encouraging the development of a nuanced understanding of relationships in DSI. The research is grounded in my personal practice, informed by engagement with design practitioners working in the Asia Pacific region and developed through core relationships with colleagues and peers that stimulate reflection on my practice. The data collected through interviews, observation, and reflection (in the form of an audio, written and visual diary) are analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2019), reflexive ethnography, and autoethnographic methods (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The methodological approach chosen for this research is summarised in Figure 3.4.

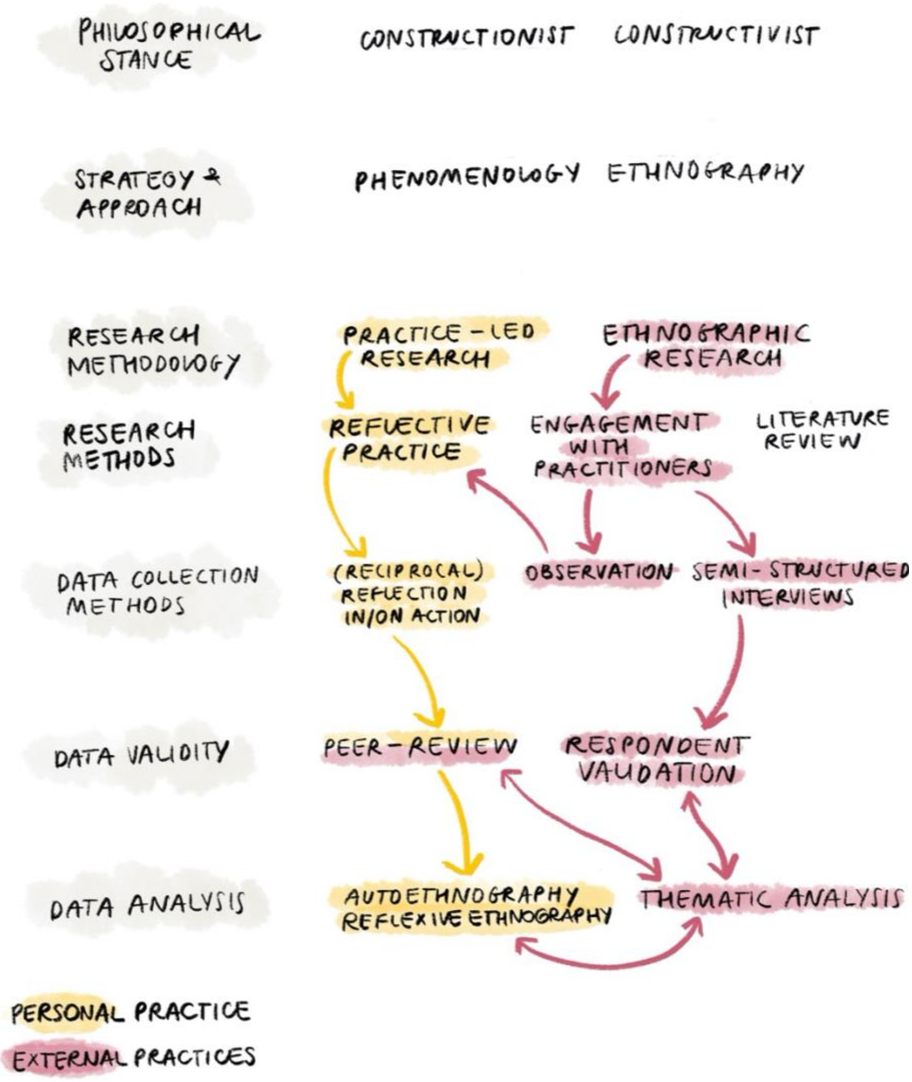


*Figure 3.2 Diagram summarising the methodological approach*

Having established the methodological framework for this study, in the next section I offer a detailed description of the contexts of practice and describe the activities undertaken to collect and analyse the data.

# Section Two: Activity and Analysis

The first section of this thesis has outlined how this research was established, including its aims and its objectives. It also has established current knowledge on the research subject, identifying areas for exploration. Finally, it has outlined the methodological approach to the inquiry.

Section Two presents the research activity, including details of each context of my personal practice. Chapter 4 introduces the key people involved and offers an account of the development of relationships and projects over time. It also describes the external practices participating in this research – the practitioners working in the Asia Pacific region who contributed to this investigation. For each of these elements, it describes how the data were collected, while Chapter 5 describes how they were analysed.

# Chapter 4. Activity and data collection

The aim of this project is to explore the intersection of relationships and design practice in the context of social innovation projects and initiatives. Throughout the duration of this research, I undertook several projects and activities to observe shifts in my practice as I engaged with different perspectives on relationships, design, and social innovation. The interplay between personal reflection and dialogue with practitioners led to the construction of the Framework for Relational Literacy presented in Chapters 6-10. This chapter describes the three contexts of practice and the core relationships I cultivated within them (§ 4.1 – 4.4); it also introduces external DSI practices (§ 4.5) and explains the approach to data collection and selection for both the external and the personal practices.

## 4.1 Introduction to personal practice

Throughout the course of the research, I was involved in three contexts of practice; each of them, in its own way, encapsulates the aims of this research. Below is a summary of the contexts of practice, while detailed descriptions are available in § 4.2, § 4.3 and § 4.4.

1. The first context of practice is a project I joined with a formal role as a design consultant for its leading organisation (here referred to with the pseudonym “the Training Centre”). Named *Schools at the heart of the community,* the project officially started in September 2018 and closed in June 2021. In this chapter, I contextualise the formation and development of my relationship with the leading project manager, Dario.
2. The second context of practice is my work with a volunteer-run community centre in a mid-sized town in the north of Italy. I became involved with the Community Centre in 2019 when I was invited to volunteer my design and facilitation skills to help build the Community Centre’s capacity to engage in social and cultural projects. Since I was mostly involved in relationship building within the organisation, this context is named *Partnership building for local*

*action*. The discussion that follows is a reflection on my relationship with one other volunteer, Greta, who also had an official role within the organisation.

3. The third context is an ongoing Practice Group which began in July 2020 as a formal training programme on community-building methods focused on peer-to-peer support and mutual aid. Following this experience, some participants and I formed a crew of five people determined to continue practising online, sharing how we are incorporating these practices in our work and how we are introducing them to the people and organisations we collaborate with. This context, named *Mutual aid relational practices*, has given me the opportunity to reflect upon how different approaches, methods and tools enable specific aspects of relationality to surface.

### 4.1.1 Relationship development and Covid-19 adaptation

The following pages summarise the beginning of the projects, their context, aims and outcomes. I outline the key relationships and interactions that sustained the projects and describe my role and positionality within them. In some cases, the formation of relationships preceded the projects, or was intertwined with the emergence of a project; the relationships will likely continue beyond the duration of this research. The Covid-19 pandemic imposed constraints to the research and forced a restructuring of all projects. New circumstances of work have introduced variations to the contexts of practice and to the ways I (and many others) cultivate relationships; the nature of the data collected and the tools used for collection reflect this variation and are discussed in relevant sections.

### 4.1.2 Presentation of data

Before describing each context of practice, I outline the rationale with which I have constructed the description.

The overarching goal for § 4.1 is to provide context for the different projects. I describe their constraints and challenges, outline my role in them, and account for the interactions I had with other actors involved. The purpose of this narration, which I recognise reflects my perspective and experience, is to 'set the scene' and allow for a better understanding of the specific relational dynamics that are described in Chapters

7-9. Each context of practice has its specificities and revolves around core relationships, which are prioritised and contextualised in each description. As I introduced in Chapter 2, the interpersonal, affective, and emotional dimensions of relationships are often treated as marginal in DSI; I chose to focus on specific dyadic relationships with Dario, Greta, and members of the Practice Group to surface particular relational dynamics. In each of these interactions, I looked for evidence and signs of a caring, respectful, intimate (Kasulis, 2002) approach to collaborative work, while also trying not to take for granted the aspects of my interaction that felt more familiar or evident.

For the first context of practice, I focus on my relationship with key collaborator Dario. This was an obvious choice: we already had a professional partnership, albeit in its early stages, and this study gave me the chance to explore how the relationship developed in the context of a shared project. In § 4.2 explain how Dario and I met, the structure of the project and the main events during the course of three years. I describe project activities, tools, methods, and approaches adopted by Dario and me and how they changed over time. I also introduce other relevant and minor actors to render the complexity of the project. The description configures my project activity, named *Building belonging in schools*, as a weaving of particularised relationships in specific contexts, within a larger web of relations created by the overall project, named *Schools at the heart of the community.* Dario and I strengthened our existing partnership by working together on the project, aiming for specific goals and outcomes while navigating change.

For the second context of practice, I focus on my relationship with Greta, a fellow volunteer and Board member at the Community Centre. While she was not my only contact at the Community Centre, our collaboration showed the key characteristics of mutual support and reciprocal care that evidenced an intimate approach to collaborative work. I describe my approach to participation at the beginning of my engagement, the realisation of the difficulties of navigating the 'messiness' of the participatory process, and the emergence of a project that Greta and I could work on together.

For the third context of practice, I focus on my relationship with four participants in an online Practice Group centred on mutual aid and relationship building. The intentionality of the group to support shared reflection as we engaged in relationship building and mutual aid practices made it an appropriate context for observation and reflection. Here, I examine the initial negotiations and agreements for the group, the development of dyadic and group relationships, the emergence of a shared project, and the progressive abandonment of tools and structures to support group interaction.

### Data collection

The data were collected in different ways depending on the context of practice, the people involved and the specific situation. The modes of data collection are as follows; see the Appendix for examples.

- **Conversation with close collaborators.** As listed in table 4.1, I collected data through conversations with close collaborators Dario, Greta, as well as in dialogue with the Practice Group. Some of these conversations were recorded; others were documented through notes, sometimes taken collaboratively with participants in the conversation. The dialogical nature of this method of data generation and collection configures them as "interactive interviews": in the definition proposed by Ellis et al. (2011), these are conversations in which researchers and participants are "one and the same" (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 4.1) and investigate together issues that emerge in conversation about specific topics; they are constituted by repeated sessions and are deeply contextual, as they are part of the development of a relationship between participant and interviewer. The focus of interactive interviews is on "what can be learned from interaction within the interview setting as well as on the stories that each person brings to the research encounter" (Mey & Mruck, 2010; as cited in Ellis et al., 2011, para. 4.1).
- **Reflection-on-action logs and diary entries.** I used these data collection methods to document my thought process upon listening to interview recordings or reading meeting notes, as well as to retain data after encounters in which recording (in audio format or through notetaking) was not possible.
- **Emails and text messages.** They were used to reconstruct how relationships started (before the beginning of this research) as well as to keep track of day-to-day communication and interactions.

### Preserving the identity of people and organisations involved

In accordance with ethical approval for this study, all participants in this research, organisations involved, project names and activities, and exact locations of activities have been anonymised to preserve the participants' identities. Since the research was co-constructed in dialogue with close collaborators, their names were replaced with full pseudonyms to enable fluent reading; I also chose to include their country of origin to provide context to cultural practices. Whenever other people or project stakeholders are mentioned in conversation, their name is also replaced with a pseudonym. Table 4.1 below summarises the context for practice, the name of the project or practice, the pseudonyms chosen for participants, their role, and their country of origin.

*Table 4.1 Pseudonyms of people and organisations involved*

| Context | Name of project or practice | Pseudo nym | Organisations involved (pseudonym) | Job title or role | Country of origin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Schools | Schools at the heart of the community | Dario | The Training Centre | Project manager and consultant | Italy |
| Community Centre | Partnership building for local action | Greta | The Community Centre | Member of the Board | Italy |
| Practice Group | Mutual aid relational practices | Nora | - | Member of the Practice Group; designer | Australia |
| Practice Group | Mutual aid relational practices | Poe | - | Member of the Practice Group; engineer | Australia |
| Practice Group | Mutual aid relational practices | Sophie | - | Member of the Practice Group; sustainability consultant | Singapore |

| Context | Name of project or practice | Pseudo nym | Organisations involved (pseudonym) | Job title or role | Country of origin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Practice Group | Mutual aid relational practices | Eric | - | Member of the Practice Group; web developer working for a charity | United Kingdom |

*Table 4.1 (continued) Pseudonyms of people and organisations involved*

## Project timeline

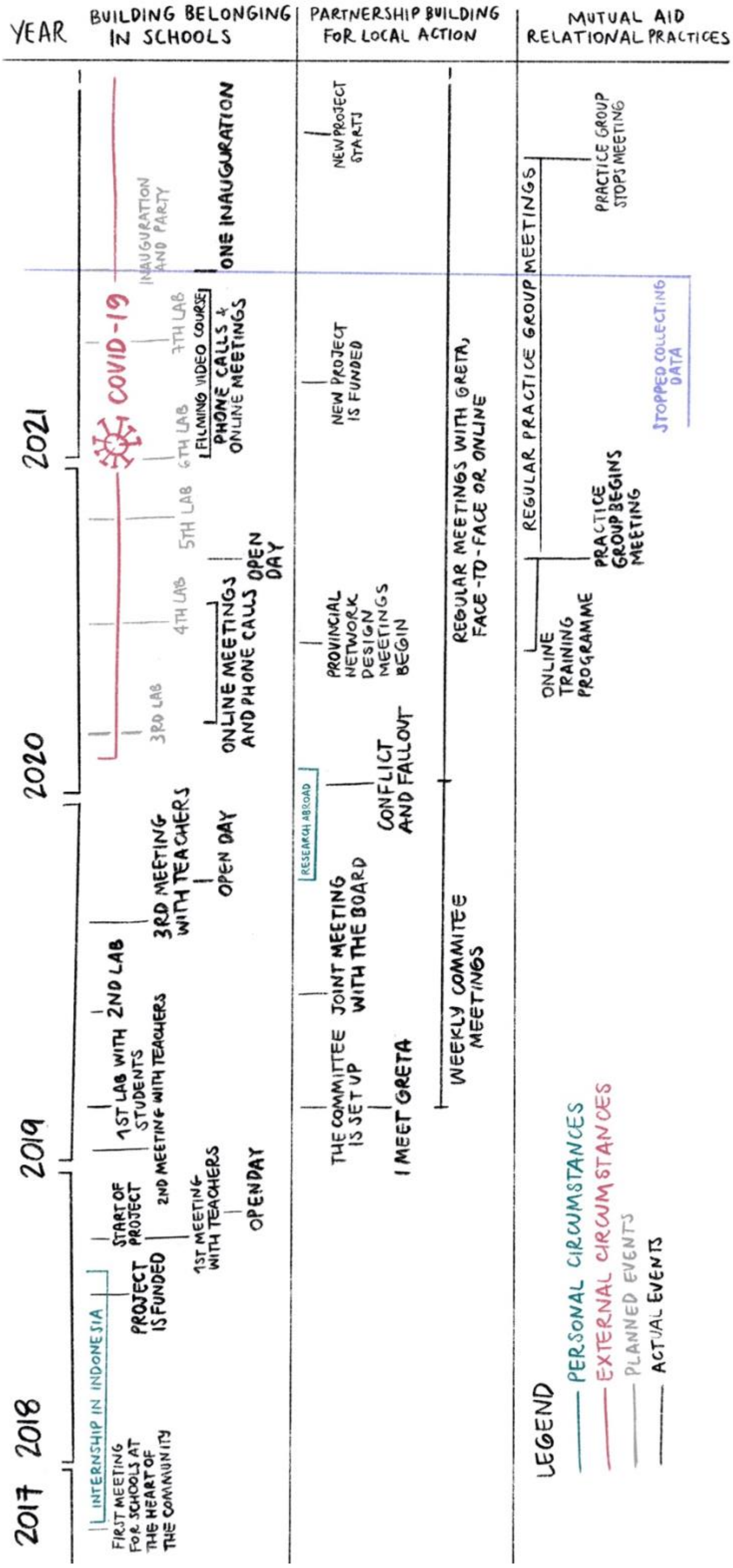


*Figure 4.1 Timeline of the three contexts of practice*

## 4.2 Context 1: Schools at the heart of the community

The first context of practice is a social project I joined with a formal role as a design consultant for its leading organisation. Named *Schools at the heart of the community,* the project involved over 40 partners: 11 public first-degree secondary schools (*scuola secondaria di primo grado* in Italian, for children 11 to 14 years old) and several local civil sector organisations, associations, and cooperatives. It was initiated, promoted, and coordinated by a leading organisation, the Training Centre, which is well known in the province for leading innovative and experimental projects in the socio-educational sector; following a call for proposals, funding was provided by an Italian social enterprise promoting the education and wellbeing of minors and their families across Italy.

The project operated across three different territories in the province of a mid-sized city in the north of Italy: small villages distributed in a rural area, a smaller town, and the province's bigger chief town with its suburbs. Project activities officially started in September 2018 and closed in June 2021, thus lasting a full cycle of study for students aged 11 to 14.

The overarching aim of the project was to strengthen the communities that revolve around schools (children, their families, school staff, educators, etcetera). This aim was pursued by experimenting with different educational approaches, introducing new services in schools and strengthening existing ones, and designing spaces that promote learning and community building (Klinenberg, 2018).

The project brought together a number of small, experimental actions that had already been piloted by individual project partners in specific contexts scattered across the province and weaved them into a tapestry of services aimed at supporting pupils, their families, teachers, principals, and the educating community at large. The result was a varied curricular and extracurricular offer for students, as well as initiatives engaging their families and the school staff.

### 4.2.1 Building belonging in schools

Within the project, I was hired to work on a specific action, named *Building belonging in schools,* centred upon the design of spaces and services in each of the 11 middle schools involved in the project. Each school participated with two classes and a varying number of professors and was granted a small budget for project implementation. Teachers, principals, and students were engaged in the design and delivery of a tangible project framing the school as a common good to be regenerated, cared for, and used in a collaborative way. A specific space within each school (such as a classroom; the school gym; the canteen; the garden; the library) was selected by participants in the project to be at the centre of our co-design initiative.

With the official job title of 'junior workshop leader', my role was to coordinate *Building belonging in schools* working alongside my colleague Dario, who also devised and managed the whole *Schools at the heart of the community* project. Our mandate was to build and maintain the partnership with schools, provide structure for the co-design process by designing and proposing specific tools, methods, and approaches, keep track of progress, and make sure the design process remained visible and transparent for all stakeholders involved. In short, Dario and I had plenty of autonomy to look after the co-design process and its participants in various ways that I describe further in this thesis. As summarised in Table 4.2, we had a clear, concrete object to work on, with a set of goals and expected outcomes. We already had a relationship and some experience of working together; he had hired me to fulfil a specific and formal role, and we were entering together in an unfamiliar context (the schools). Since the work was rooted in the collaboration between Dario and myself, I now briefly describe how it started and how I was initially involved in the project.

*Table 4.2 Summary of Context 1*

| **Context 1: Building belonging in schools** | |
|---|---|
| Main collaborator | Dario |
| Project objectives | Specific, clear |
| Relationship with collaborator | Existing at start of project |
| Alignment on design approach | Existing at start of project |
| Context of design action | Unfamiliar to both |
| Role of researcher | Clear and formalised |

### 4.2.2 First interactions and collaboration set-up

Dario and I first met in late 2016, when we were introduced by a common acquaintance. On that occasion, Dario brought me a copy of his recently published book on partnership project design and management; soon after we met, he offered his help with a project linked to an organisation I had just co-founded. At the start, our collaboration constituted an opportunity for me to learn from practice, as I had just returned to Italy after studying and working abroad and wanted to build knowledge of the social sector in my region. Working together, as we later discussed, we found my knowledge of participatory design methods and tools was complementary to the experience of Dario (who does not have a formal Design education) in devising and managing multidisciplinary projects aimed at local development and welfare innovation. While Dario gradually involved me in specific activities within projects he managed, *Schools at the heart of the community* was the first project that saw us work together on the same action for a continuous period of three years.

My first involvement with the project was on the occasion of a large meeting organised by Dario in October 2017 at the Training Centre's headquarters. The aim of this meeting was to gather potential partners and initial ideas to participate in a call for proposals. Dario led the meeting, using one of the facilitation techniques I recognised from his book. On that occasion, Dario introduced me to the director of the Training Centre; I also met several project partners, a few of whom I had already crossed paths with in different circumstances and projects.

The project proposal was eventually submitted; other than participating in the first meeting, I did not contribute to its preparation. Months went by as all project partners waited to learn the results of the application process by the funder. Dario and I kept in touch during my time in Indonesia, where I took an internship between November 2017 and May 2018; in March 2018, he called me to let me know that *Schools at the heart of the community* would be funded and that, starting from September 2018, he would like us to work together on the project.

### 4.2.3 Getting the project started

In September 2018, Dario and I met at the Training Centre. Dario re-introduced me to the director, and we chatted about my background, my studies, and my experience in Indonesia. During the meeting, I mentioned this research project and inquired about potentially including *Schools at the heart of the community* as a site for research, with a specific focus on my relationship with Dario. In a following private conversation with Dario, he agreed to participate in the research, and we finalised ethical procedures.

Dario and I went through the whole project proposal together, discussing our respective roles and responsibilities and analysing strengths and potential obstacles to the project. Most project activities would have to be delivered during school time, and we observed teachers might feel deprived of time to deliver their educational programme. I proposed to make a visual 'roadmap': four leaflets – one for each project action, including *Building belonging in schools* – clearly illustrating all project activities, the time commitment required and the contact information of each partner organisation. Leaflets would be distributed during our first meeting with teachers as well as during a project 'open day': a gathering of all project partners, including schools, organised so that we could schedule the activities for the upcoming year.

### 4.2.4 Meeting the teachers

In October and November 2018, and before the open day, Dario and I scheduled individual visits to each school to meet teachers and principals, describe the overall project and our specific action and address any questions and doubts. Over a year had passed since the submission of the proposal: some teachers had left the schools and were replaced by others, some schools had gotten a new principal whom we had never met, and all schools were in the process of selecting the two classes that would participate in the project, depending on the students' educational needs and the availability of teachers.

We carpooled to each meeting, using the drive together to prepare and debrief. At the beginning of the meeting, we introduced Dario as the general project manager, and me as a colleague working on *Building belonging in schools.* We talked about our role in the project, our professional credentials, and our interests. We presented ourselves and the project in the most approachable way possible because, as Dario had explained during our first meeting,

> *"[The funder] made it very clear that the strength of the project, what got us funded, was the breadth of the partnership. We have 40 partners and many activities, and the funder liked it. Now, of course, we have to manage the project, which is a whole other story. Schools might be a bit scared of such a commitment". (Dario)*

Therefore, we brought the leaflets I had prepared and other material from the Training Centre that would help us introduce ourselves and the project to teachers. We used the leaflets as anchors for our conversation; I had purposefully designed them in a large A3 format with plenty of white space so that they could be annotated, and they included our contact details, a clear timeline, and an example of how the project might develop (see Figure 4.2).

Besides being a practical resource on which we could base our conversations with teachers, the leaflets served as reassurance for them that the project was manageable. They gave information about the content of our future meetings, their length, and the time of year when they would happen, lending the design and delivery process an aura of certainty; Dario and I agreed it would be much easier to present the leaflets and clarify that the process would be subject to changes, ebbs and flows, than to come to the meetings empty-handed, and try to get teachers to support the project without knowing where it would lead, or how much energy it would require.

In the leaflets, *Building belonging in schools* was divided into three phases:

1. **Training and discussion meetings** (*incontri formativi e di confronto,* green colour in the picture) during which we would meet with teachers, discuss the development of the project, invite schools from the same area to meet and share any learnings
2. **Co-design meetings** (*momenti di co-progettazione,* orange colour in the picture), during which we would engage students and teachers in workshops to co-design the new school spaces and services
3. **Implementation and management phase** (*fase di realizzazione e gestione,* pink colour in the picture), where we would facilitate discussions between teachers and students on how to take care of the new space, how to promote it and celebrate our work together with an inauguration party for the whole school.

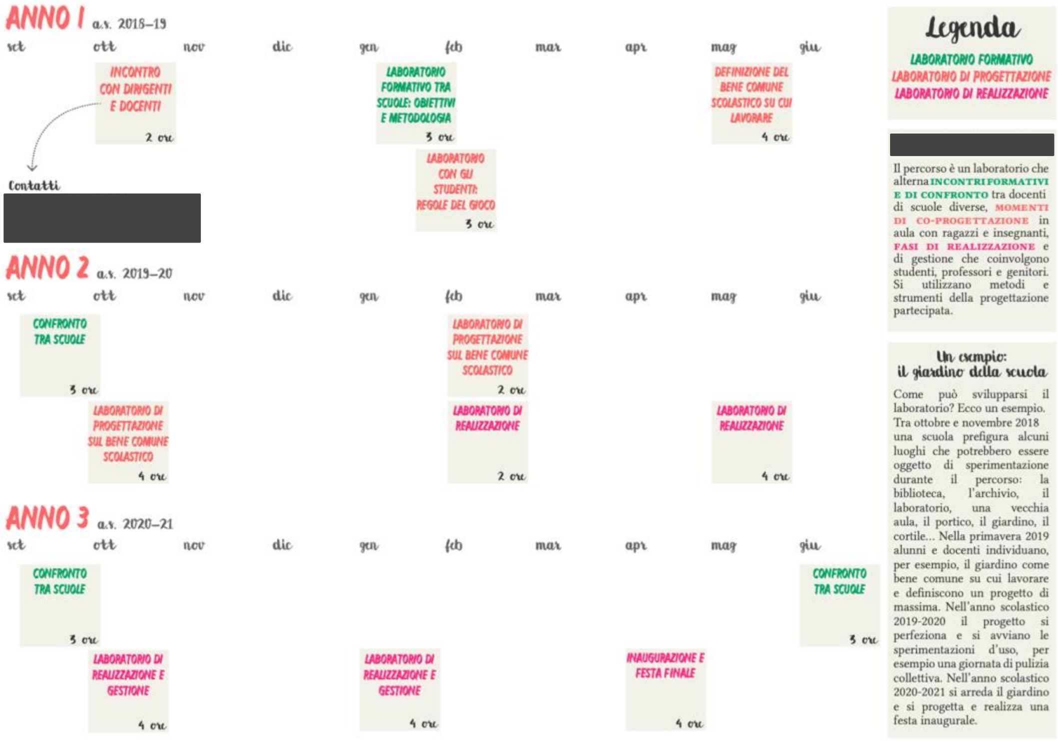


*Figure 4.2 The leaflet for Building belonging in schools showing the calendar for year 1, 2, and 3. Personal details redacted for privacy reasons.*

This division was a simplified version of a more articulate project plan which included five different phases:

- **Ideation,** aimed at understanding which school space to focus on and what services and activities to develop in it
- **Implementation,** during which we would engage the children's parents and other school staff in activities to improve the space together, and liaise with the administrative staff to finalise the contracts for renovation and the purchase of furniture and equipment
- An **experimentation** phase aimed at tweaking the project iteratively by using newly furnished school spaces with children and teachers, making small adjustments and improvements and designing a programme of activities for the space
- A **communication** phase aimed at promoting the new space or service within and outside each school

- A final **celebration** that would mark the conclusion of the project and the official opening of the space for the whole school and the neighbourhood.

Each phase involved one or more co-design activities using different methods and tools. Dario and I already had a plan for the ideation and implementation phase, which included guided brainstorming sessions, explorations of the schools' spaces guided by the students, and the development of project ideas using a bespoke project canvas. During our first meeting with the teachers, however, we focused on providing framing for the project, its significance for the school's community, and we introduced other project partners and their activities. For *Building belonging in schools,* we explained that we were starting with a more general and standardised approach, but we did not know what would come from the initial co-design sessions; that we expected to progressively adapt the co-design process to the needs and desires of individual schools. For instance, some schools might need assistance with selecting furniture and equipment; others with co-creating a set of rules for a new multidisciplinary laboratory; others with designing a library loan service, and so on; therefore, the activities for year two and three as listed on the leaflet were indicative.

Dario and I also listened to teachers as they shared their impressions about the project and described the classes they had selected to participate in the project. In some instances, they gave us a tour of the school, describing educational and after-school programmes that were already in place and introducing us to other members of the school staff. Dario took the chance to answer questions and address doubts about the project as a whole, offering to liaise teachers with other partner organisations.

For *Building belonging in schools,* we proposed a total of four meetings for each school during the first school year, two with the students, and two with the teachers only; we collected email addresses and phone numbers of teachers and principals and compiled a mailing list to share with all project partners. After our meeting, Dario sent a follow-up email to thank all participants and remind them of the open day, during which we would schedule all appointments for the first school year.

### 4.2.5 Year 1: ideation

During the first year of the project, besides the meeting described above, Dario and I organised one additional meeting with the teachers, and two co-design sessions with the students. At the end of each meeting, we used our time together in the drive home to debrief, share impressions and agree on the next steps to take in the project. I wrote in my diary:

> *"[Dario and I] talk about all the 'invisible work' we need to do to maintain a good relationship with the schools – emails, calls, checking in with the professors. We support each other and discuss all the meetings when we get out. I should be recording these discussions!"*

With Dario's consent, I started to record our 'car conversations' to keep track of the evolution of the projects and our relationship. I used the recordings as prompts for personal reflection on my practice.

**The second meeting with the teachers**

We configured the second meeting with the teachers as a brainstorming session to gather their ideas on the schools as a common good. We organised it on a territorial basis, gathering different schools from the same territory in one space (usually one of the schools, apart from the meeting in the province's chief town, which was held at the Training Centre). The goal of this gathering was to enable teachers from different schools to share experiences – to make for a richer brainstorming session, as well as to encourage network building between schools.

To guide the brainstorming, we employed a facilitation technique from Dario's book; we also planned to use the same technique to facilitate the first brainstorming session with the students. We wanted teachers to have a similar experience to the one we were going to propose to the students, hoping that this would build trust in us and in our methods; it was also a way for us to check with teachers whether the facilitation technique was suitable for groups of about 40 eleven-year-olds. Besides making the teachers more comfortable about the process, our choice of tools and methods made *us* more comfortable. In April 2019, I wrote in my diary:

> *“It is a process we know, we have used before, we master it, and it produces neat results we can analyse and ‘give back’ to teachers in the form of a report. We are dealing with uncertainty: we don’t know what will happen in this project, and using a facilitation technique gives us more certainty, some anchor points, some structure. We can say: trust us, we know what we are doing”.*

During the meeting, teachers were encouraged to share their views around a central question: “Starting from a critical analysis of your experience (strengths and weaknesses, successes, failures, and opportunities), what ideas, aspirations, spaces, initiatives, concrete projects could make the school a common good for the territory (area, city, neighbourhood) and the community?”. We framed this question by introducing the most recent research on the role of schools in the territory as a point of reference for the whole community, thus adding a training element to our meeting.

### The first meeting with the students

We held the first meeting with the students in two classes at a time, for a total of about 40 students in each school. I drew pictures and diagrams to explain the different steps of a project and the phases of the activities we were proposing on that day. Firstly, we introduced the concept of *project*, proposing a definition: “the goal of a project is to make the world more similar to what we would like it to be” (see Fig. 4.3).

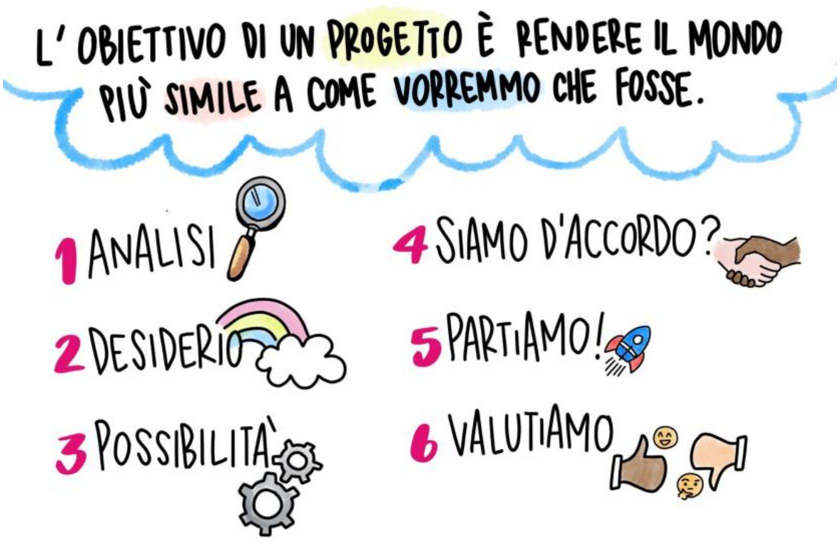


*Figure 4.3 Diagram explaining the goals and phases of a project. Translation: "The goal of a project is to make the world more similar to what we would like it to be. [Phases of a project]: 1) Analysis 2) Wishes, desires 3) Possibility 4) Are we in agreement? 5) Let's go! 6) Let's evaluate"*

The diagram in Figure 4.4 describes and contextualises the question we put at the centre of our work with the kids: "How would you like to use the school to do things you don't normally do in school?". We distributed copies of the diagrams to the students divided into groups, encouraging them to think of activities that are somewhere between usual (e.g., lessons) and impossible ones (e.g., building a spaceship); we invited them to identify aspects of the schools that could be improved, spaces that should be taken care of, and fun activities to experiment with.

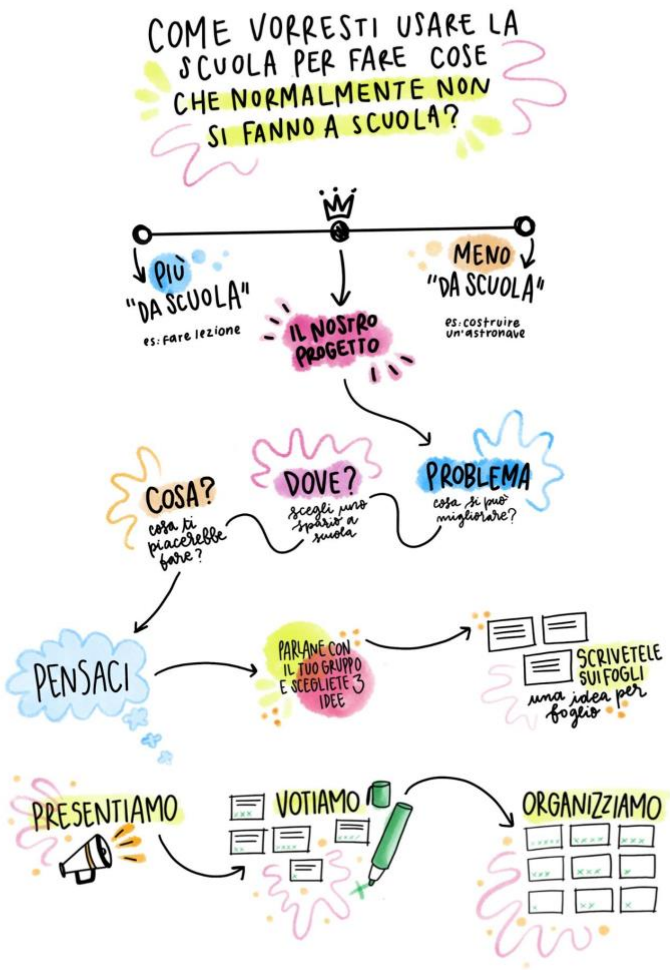


*Figure 4.4 A diagram explaining the activities planned for the first workshop with the students.*

Between the first and the second meeting with the students, Dario and I prepared two detailed reports with the ideas that had emerged during the meetings. The reports included pictures we took during the co-design sessions, an extensive list of all the ideas, which we had organised by themes, and additional resources and links to further explore the themes and the proposals. Dario also personally phoned the teachers who were the main point of reference for each school, reminding them to engage with principals and other school staff to define the final space where the project would be developed. At this stage, Dario was still maintaining contacts with the teachers, while I continued facilitating the co-design sessions with the kids.

**The second meeting with the students**

The second meeting with the students was also a co-design session. We explored the different spaces in the school in small groups. Then, we used a canvas (Figure 4.5) that Dario and I had designed to guide small groups of students in the development of the projects they had proposed. Again, we produced a detailed report with all the projects developed by the children, and distributed it to all teachers, before the schools closed for summer between June and September 2019. This activity concluded our first year of the project.

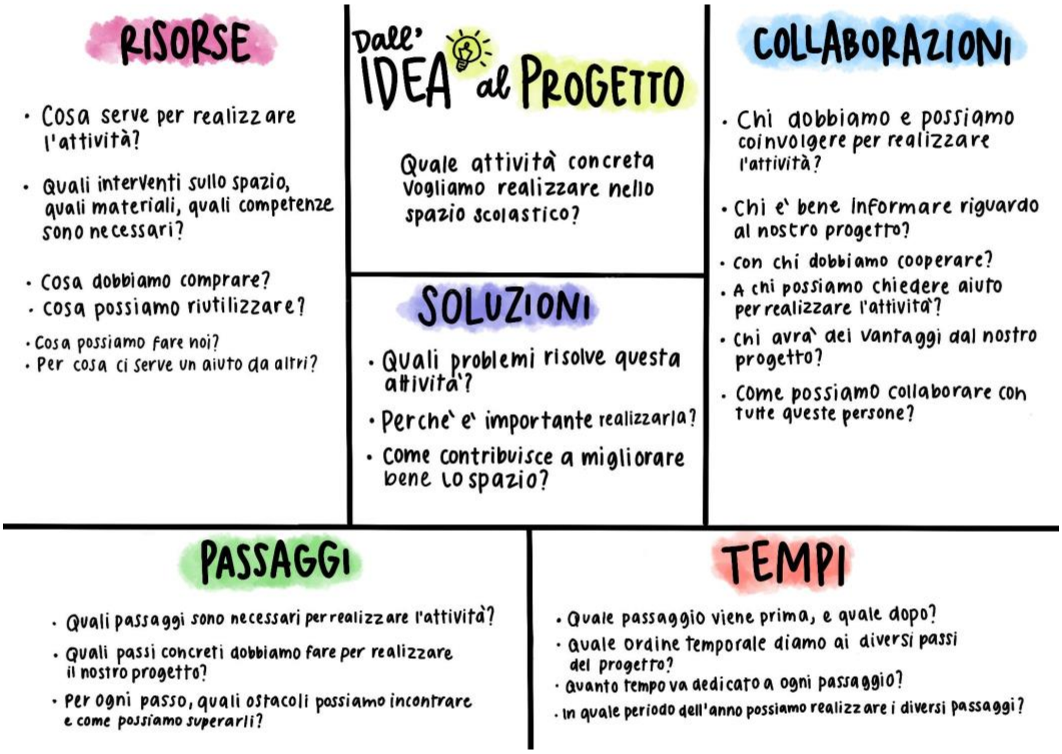


*Figure 4.5 The canvas we used to guide students in developing a project. It invites them to develop their ideas into projects considering the idea's effectiveness in solving a problem (centre), the available resources (top left), the collaborations needed to bring the project forward (top right), the different steps of the project (bottom left) and the timeframe of the project (bottom right).*

### 4.2.6 Year 2: implementation and Covid-19 adaptation

We kicked off the second year of the project with another open day, during which we pencilled in meetings in schools with teachers and with the children. The first of these meetings was dedicated to teachers only; Dario and I decided to visit each school separately, rather than asking teachers to gather at one specific school per territory as we did at the beginning of the first year. “You don’t want to bother them too much,” Dario said, “we are already asking a lot of them. It’s best if we pay them a visit, even if it means driving to each school and back”. Between September 2019 and January 2020, we were looking to finalise the choice of the school space we would redesign together; Dario and I extended the invitation to the meeting to principals, so that we could formalise decisions. Upon the presentation of a budget, the leading partner (the Training Centre) could release the funds to the schools, which they would use to furnish and equip the new space.

Dario and I agreed that a two-hour meeting would not be enough to discuss all points and that it would be better to precede the meeting with a phone call with teachers. This time, I would be making the calls, since I had already met the teachers several times and there already was some familiarity. Dario sent an email to teachers specifying that, from this moment on, each school’s journey through the project would be personalised and marking a handover of some project responsibilities to me. He attached an updated version of our report to the email: besides listing all the students’ project ideas, it reiterated the expected outcomes and gave an outline of the next steps.

From that moment on, I periodically caught up with teachers over the phone; during our calls, we discussed project advancement, the involvement of the local Municipality (public school buildings and open spaces are owned by the local Municipality, which needed to approve all substantial interventions); we talked about the engagement of other stakeholders like the students’ parents, changes in the school staff and relationships with new staff members and, increasingly, we discussed aspects of the project that I was not officially responsible for (for example, project activities organised by other partners). After each of these calls, I would update Dario on the state of the project and inform him of any issues that I did not have the capacity to resolve.

During the meetings with teachers, all schools identified a space that would be the object of our intervention. In some schools, we met the principal and new teachers for the first time and introduced them to the project; we agreed to meet again in the new year, after the winter holidays, to finalise project designs. The original plan was to have all spaces redesigned and completed by the end of the school year in June 2020, engaging students, potentially their families, teachers, local organisations in community initiatives such as redecorating the space, community gardening, book swaps, theatre courses, public readings or screenings, and workshops. However, all the meetings we had planned for February 2020 were cancelled, and the project entered a phase of profound uncertainty when all schools were closed for the Covid-19 emergency in March 2020.

All project activities in schools were suspended; communication and work with teachers continued remotely. In February 2020, we had entered the operational phase of the project; some schools had begun to collect and compare quotes relating to furnishings, equipment and services needed to set up the new spaces and start the experimentation phase. With repeated extensions of security measures well past the month of April, the project had a setback: schools had to manage the emergency, organise remote teaching, and we chose to take a step back, not to load this complicated phase with further tasks and demands. In May, when the situation stabilised, we resumed contact with the teachers. Through three online meetings organised for groups of schools divided by territorial areas, we tried to offer a space to voice worries, difficulties, and tiredness, but also to strengthen each other and explore the possibilities generated by the situation of uncertainty.

We also informed the teachers that the project funder had offered to allocate the budget for furniture and equipment for purchases that could be useful for coping with the emergency (for example by buying electronic devices for some students). However, all schools expressed their intention to continue with the development of the projects, possibly adapting them to the new distancing measures imposed by the pandemic. Despite the pandemic, we tried to preserve the relationships we had built, without closing ourselves off to possible developments and changes of path in the project.

Contrary to our plans, during the spring of 2020 we were unable to involve the students in the implementation of their designs and in the experimentation phase. With the reopening of schools in autumn, Dario and I discussed that we would have to face several questions: how would the space be used? When would it be possible to go back to using it ‘normally’? How would we be able to involve children further? We spent the month of July coming up with different scenarios, hoping that in September the situation would be more stable.

### 4.2.7 Year 3: accepting permanent change

In October 2020, we organised another open day. Since we, and all project partners, had to restructure our interventions in schools, I created a new set of leaflets to distribute to the teachers, with remodelled proposals for extracurricular activities. During the open day, we learned that schools were unlikely to reopen for external staff, and although we pencilled in co-design sessions with students and teachers in some schools, it was uncertain whether we would be able to meet the students again. In our meetings, there was an atmosphere of acceptance and resignation: teachers had adjusted to long-distance learning. Still, they needed to set clear boundaries to protect their work and carry out their teaching programme, preparing students for their final exams. Dario and I found ourselves in the difficult position of having to mediate between the interests of teachers and those of project partners, who needed to carry out planned project activities and pay their workers accordingly.

In our debrief meeting, Dario and I agreed that we did not want to negotiate, and potentially impose, our presence in schools in such a difficult time. At this stage, we did not know whether schools would be able to furnish their new space, as most rooms (including laboratories, libraries and sometimes even gyms) had been converted into classrooms to allow distancing between students. Therefore, we decided to record a video series explaining the co-design activities, accompanied by a guidebook for teachers to conduct the co-design portion of the activities. Students would be able to watch the videos and connect the creation of a new space with the design process as it was originally intended; teachers could always refer to the material in class and even offer it to other classes in the future. Dario and I wrote the video scripts together; while he prepared the guidebooks for teachers, I took care of filming, editing, and distributing the videos.

Parallel to the creation of the video course, we kept in touch with teachers to support them through the delivery of the project. Some schools proceeded swiftly and autonomously, sending us pictures of the finished, furnished space. In other cases, we scheduled regular catch-ups by phone or text messages; sometimes, I offered support with the choice of furniture and equipment, preparing the budget for the schools, and liaising with the school's administrative staff. By the end of May 2021, nine out of eleven schools had a completely furnished and equipped space; one school had decided to simplify its engagement in the project by only buying equipment to support current curricular and extracurricular activities; one school was still waiting for the Municipality to authorise the project. Upon receiving the videos, some teachers emailed Dario and me thanking us for our support and praising us for the care we put in the partnership and the project. Once restrictions were partially eased in June 2021, one school organised a small inauguration for their new space; teachers and the principal specified that our presence would be meaningful to them and to the children and invited us to join them in the celebration.

### 4.2.8 Summary and key learnings from *Building belonging in schools*

Although the project underwent profound changes, our partnerships with the teachers mostly survived the difficulties and, in some cases, they were strengthened and opened the possibility of future collaboration. Ultimately, Dario and I discussed, we achieved the project's goal of strengthening the educating community, though in ways we had not planned originally; working together, we strengthened our relationship as well.

Initially, our approach to the project was more standardised and we used facilitation techniques and tools that made us feel comfortable and 'in control' of the design process. As the project progressed, we developed materials, tools and communication patterns that were specifically tailored to the unique combinations of people we encountered on our path; our approach changed and adapted depending on each participant's specific needs and aptitudes. Some changes in the relationships were quite predictable (for example, with most teachers we switched to the informal address form "*tu*" instead of the polite address form "*lei*" during the project). Other changes were less predictable (for example, with some teachers we developed a familiarity that led us to share details about our interests, our family life, difficulties related to Covid-19, or the relational troubles with other colleagues and the principal). Arguably, it is the relationship between me and Dario, and between us and the constellation of teachers, principals and students involved that made *Building belonging in schools* what it was. Dario and I entered, navigated, and contributed to a web of relationships (between teachers, principals, students, their families, local municipalities, other project partners) in specific local contexts; this interaction influenced the development of our relationship.

## 4.3 Context 2: Partnership building for local action

The second context of practice, here referred to with the pseudonym of ‘the Community Centre’, is a local organisation where I volunteered offering my skills in design and facilitation. It is located in the chief town of a province in the North of Italy. In this context, I engaged in a series of activities I have grouped under the name of *Partnership building for local action.*

Part of a local and national network of cultural and recreational associations, the Community Centre is a non-profit entity and is entirely volunteer-run and managed. University students and people in the 18-35 age range are particularly involved and form the majority of volunteers and members. In late 2018, the Community Centre had moved to a new, bigger location, attracting more volunteers. Some people I had met through the work in the organisation I co-founded (in which Dario was also involved, as I described in previous sections) were volunteering for the Community Centre; they suggested I should join a newborn group that was going to meet weekly to discuss the positioning of the Community Centre with regards to cultural and political action in the city. This group, which we will call the Committee, would be separate from the Community Centre’s Board of Directors, whose members were elected by the organisation’s general assembly. The Committee would be open to any member, regardless of their position within the organisation.

Choosing to volunteer in the Committee, I entered a web of relationships (between members of the Committee, of the Board, of the Community Centre, and members of the provincial network of local community centres) that intersected different projects and influenced my practice in many ways. In this thesis, I focus on my relationship with one other volunteer and Board member, Greta, as our collaboration was vital to navigating partnership building and defining my position within the Community Centre. As described in Table 4.3, Greta and I did not have experience of working together; she knew the context very well, while I was a newcomer whose role as a volunteer was not clearly defined or formalised. Moreover, the Committee did not yet have a clear, concrete object to work on and goals and objectives were not defined at the start of the project. With Greta's partnership, over the course of two years I went from engaging with the Committee to participating in the local network of community centres and then to establishing collaboration with the wider national network, supporting partnerships and projects that would allow us to act locally.

*Table 4.3 Summary of Context 2*

| **Context 2: Partnership building for local action** | |
|---|---|
| Main collaborator | Greta (plus a varying number of Committee members) |
| Project objectives | Not set, unclear |
| Relationship with collaborator | Absent at start of project |
| Alignment on design approach | Absent at start of project |
| Context of design action | Unfamiliar to the researcher; familiar to Greta |
| Role of the researcher | Unclear, not formalised |

### 4.3.1 First interactions and collaboration set-up

In March 2019, when I joined the newborn Committee, the group did not have a clear project to work on, but a general idea of topics to discuss. Unlike most of the group, I had not attended university in town, and I was a new member of the Community Centre; in my position as an outsider, I observed the initial meetings with curiosity. I picked up from different volunteers that the atmosphere in the Community Centre was quite tense; I noticed that we tended to have long debates, not always leading to a clear decision. I proposed we could approach our meetings differently and, with the support of the group members who had invited me to join the Committee, I offered to facilitate a brainstorming session. To this proposal, Greta responded: "Whatever would help us have a normal conversation, where we're not at each other's throats, is fine by me!".

Thus, I invited the group to follow a facilitation technique where, starting from a central question, participants are invited to reflect individually, share their reflection in pairs and in small groups, and bring a synthesis of shared ideas to the whole group[2]. I chose this method in an attempt to diminish power struggles, expand the diversity of inputs, build shared understanding, and reduce the dimension of the group engaging in discussion while simultaneously putting a time limit to the debate. At the beginning of the session, I acknowledged that letting me guide the process required the group to trust me and allow me to lead, and asked if anyone had any objections. I also reminded the group that, although we were all passionate about the topic at hand, it was possible to have a conversation about difficult themes in an enjoyable and mutually respectful way. After the session, I asked for feedback, which was positive overall; Greta commented that she felt completely comfortable, and she appreciated our constructive attitude. In the following days, I compiled a report summarising our proposals and shared it with the group.

### 4.3.2 Identifying our purpose

While our brainstorming session had helped us discover our common values and interests, in the following meetings we identified the need to clearly define our purpose as a group. Some members were interested in discussing our values at length, clearly defining a political reasoning, and exploring the implications of our work before taking any action towards the creation of a cultural programme. However, it became clear that the Board of Directors expected us to have tangible outputs quite early on (specifically, a calendar of events for the Community Centre).

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[2] This structure is common to many facilitation techniques, including "1-2-4-All" (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013, p. 353) or "OPERA" (Cau & Maino, 2017, p. 153)

Meanwhile, the word was spreading that there was a new Committee in charge of creating a cultural programme, and many were coming forward with ideas for events. Overwhelmed with the task of evaluating proposals, the group decided to split into sub-groups to discuss themes that were close to the participants' interests and values, while maintaining a weekly general meeting to update the whole group and organise events.

The smaller, values-focused meetings were not formal, but rather moments of socialisation around specific topics of interest. While the topic might be serious (for example, one group met to discuss contrast to the *mafia*), coming together for discussion also offered a chance to meet new people and cultivate friendships. However, with two weekly meetings mostly held in the evening or during weekends, members' participation in the Committee became quite demanding. Greta and I had started driving together to the Community Centre to attend Committee meetings; during this time, we talked about the Centre's internal organisation and her work as a Board member. We found out we had some friends in common, and she introduced me to other volunteers and community members.

Following a joint meeting with the Board in June 2019, more Board members began participating in Committee meetings. I shared with the group that perhaps we needed to clarify our purpose, our respective roles, and our decision-making methods before we could open the Committee to more participants. However, since I had joined the Community Centre recently, I did not feel comfortable with being too critical of Board members and their participation in the Committee.

The involvement of Board members in the Committee brought legitimacy to the group, which was consequently given some budget to organise events. As event organisation increasingly required time and energy, the meetings focused on values and common interests were abandoned in favour of weekly event-focused meetings. The Board of Directors expressed more satisfaction with the Committee's work; however, some of the original Committee members were dissatisfied with the content of our meetings and frequently lamented that the Community Centre's cultural programming lacked coherence and focus, and that they missed value-focused meetings. On the Committee's group chat, messages became increasingly argumentative and polemical. When, in November 2019, the group organised a meeting to discuss some of its members' perplexities and doubts regarding our purpose and focus, most newer members did not attend, and the meeting was postponed indefinitely.

### 4.3.3 Conflict and fallout

Between October and December 2019, my participation in the Committee was intermittent as I was travelling abroad for research purposes. I was confused about my role in the Committee: I was invited because of my facilitation skills but found myself in a position where I did not feel comfortable or legitimised to facilitate meetings, being one of the newest volunteers in what looked like a tense situation. My visible contribution to the group became designing promotional material for the Community Centre; meanwhile, I built relationships with other volunteers. The issues within the Committee became the topic of many one-on-one conversations where volunteers voiced their concerns and frustrations.

While I was abroad, I woke up one morning to a long thread of messages on the Committee's group chat. What seemed like a small misunderstanding had blown up into a fight. Instinctively, I reached out to Greta to ask her what happened, and I learned that the activity of the Committee had been suspended by the Board.

### 4.3.4 Rebuilding trust and moving forward

When I returned to Italy, I was invited to represent the Committee in the following Board meeting. I had not participated in the discussion that led to the suspension of the group's activity; nonetheless, I took part in the meeting and offered my perspective. I spoke about the need for the Committee to be trusted, about respective roles and responsibilities in the Committee and in the Board, about the need to address conflict before it blew out of proportion. Over the course of the following weeks, I spoke with several volunteers, Board members and Committee members, collecting their perspective; through these conversations, we processed what had happened. I found in Greta a confidante: we started meeting frequently, even outside of the Community Centre ("to take a break", Greta commented), and I learned that she too had been having conversations with volunteers to navigate the conflict and try and repair relationships.

When, in March 2020, Italy entered its first lockdown and all community centres closed, Greta and I kept in touch regularly.

When the lockdown measures were eased, in June 2020, a small group of volunteers started organising ‘design meetings’ with the provincial network of community centres with the purpose of identifying opportunities for joint projects across the network. Together with Greta (who had since left the Board), one other volunteer and member of the local Board (we will call him Filippo) and two Board members from the Community Centre, I joined these provincial network meetings. This environment, too, was riddled with conflict and tensions (exacerbated by the lockdown and the strain on the community centres’ economic sustainability), and we soon found ourselves in an impasse: the network did not have a concrete project to work on, which would have given us an excuse to develop new relationships and try to repair conflictual ones; however, to come up with a joint project, we needed a base of trust and capacity for collaboration which we lacked.

Greta and I discussed leveraging our personal relationships to encourage network building while, together with Filippo, we looked for opportunities to fund a project. We often talked about the difficulty of building partnerships with other organisations when internal relationships were conflictual. After one failed attempt to participate in a call for funding in partnership with other local organisations, in August 2020 the local network entered a partnership with the national network of community centres to participate in a call for proposals. Despite the second lockdown (and the suspension of local network meetings), the call for proposal was successful. The project was approved in April 2021, with the official start date in September 2021. Greta and I agreed that we would facilitate the co-design and delivery of project activities, seeking the partnership of other community centres in the network and organisations in the city. I stopped collecting data in June 2021; the project will require us to mediate, broker relationships and facilitate dialogue among different partners.

### 4.3.5 Summary and key learnings from *Partnership building for local action*

Despite the conflict and the difficulties brought by the pandemic, Greta and I were able to build and strengthen our relationship, support each other, navigate uncertainty, and identify and pursue opportunities for our community. Similarly to *Building belonging in schools,* joining the community centre meant finding my place as a node in a complex and ever-evolving web of relationships. I had to accept that there was not one 'standard' or 'perfect' way to participate and that the co-design process could not be disentangled from the people, practices and structures that were present. Non-linearity, changes of pace, gaps and conflict were design contingencies that neither I nor other participants could avoid, suppress, or replace with more "compliant" (Pierri, 2016, p. 2) or manageable participants and processes – particularly not without jeopardising the relationships that kept the Community Centre open and running on an entirely volunteer basis. I learned that attuning to and preserving relations by cultivating flexibility, readiness and responsiveness were more relevant and effective practices (Akama & Light, 2018; Light, 2015). The dialogue with Greta and other volunteers allowed me not only to build a relationship and find my place in the network, but also to collaboratively make sense of the design process and identify ways forward.

## 4.4 Context 3: Mutual aid relational practices

The third context of practice, which I have named *Mutual aid relational practices*, is a peer-group practice started after four participants and I attended the same online training programme offered by two practitioners participating in this research (Leon and Alba – see § 4.6). The training, which lasted two weeks and included four group calls within a larger group of participants, was focused on practising methods and tools for community building relying on peer-to-peer support and mutual aid. The concepts and practices we were introduced to included ways to cultivate connection and collaboration, promote mutual support and mutual learning, and develop a sense of belonging and a culture of care within groups and organisations. Besides connecting during the live calls, participants were encouraged to form groups through an online forum to continue practising beyond the end of the programme.

In this thesis, I focus on the relationship I developed with four participants with whom I continued to meet regularly from August 2020 to (and beyond) June 2021, when I stopped collecting data. As summarised in Table 4.4, Nora, Sophie, Eric, Poe (all names were replaced with pseudonyms) and I had never met before the training programme started; some of us did not meet even during the programme, as we were assigned to different sub-groups and did not get to know every participant personally. Over the course of ten months, the Practice Group enabled me to observe and discuss the development of relationships, their specific dynamics, the influence that specific methods, tools, approaches had on dyadic relationships and group relationships, and the impact the interaction with the group had on how I build and maintain relationships in my practice.

*Table 4.4 Summary of Context 3*

| **Context 3: Mutual aid relational practices** | |
|---|---|
| Main collaborators | 4 (Nora, Sophie, Eric and Poe) |
| Project objectives | Practising relationality and mutual aid in a group of peers |
| Relationship with collaborators | Absent at start of project |
| Alignment on approach | Present (from taking the same training) |
| Context of practice | Unfamiliar to all (online setting) |
| Role of the researcher | Participant in a peer group |

### 4.4.1 Agreeing on a meeting format

Initially, we dedicated some time to agree on meeting formats. Sophie, who had initially made the proposal to form the Practice Group, suggested we should meet on Zoom every two weeks for 90 minutes. She also created a shared Google Drive document where the group could add agenda items for following meetings; we started taking notes collaboratively, keeping track of our conversations in detail. The following week, as many of us felt the need for more frequent meetings, we agreed on a weekly schedule, with no obligation to join meetings or RSVP.

Between mid-August and mid-September, we maintained a structure of 40 minutes of check-in and free-flow conversation, followed by 40 minutes of practice of a specific tool and a final check-out. Tools we practised included ways to structure conversations such as those suggested in *Liberating Structures* (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013); "case clinics" (Scharmer, 2009); theatre improvisation exercises; card games with prompts for conversation and reflection.

After five weeks, Sophie suggested we should reflect on whether we needed to change the structure of our meetings. Some of us expressed the need for more structure, so we agreed to dedicate a full hour of our meeting to practising tools. We began rotating facilitation responsibilities more intentionally, creating a section at the beginning of our notes where people could volunteer to be 'facilitator of the week' (up until that point, Sophie had taken on most of the facilitation). On this occasion, I also invited the group to participate in this research project. Our collaborative notes report my invitation:

> *"Would any of you be willing to join a one-to-one or group session for my research? Would it be ok to bring discussions here into my research? No personal information. A reflection on how I'm changing my perspective due to interactions with you". (Viola, 17.09.20).*

On the 15th of October, roughly two months after we had started our meetings, Sophie prompted us to review our structure and commitment again. Many in the group agreed there was too much structure now: we missed free-flowing conversation. From then on, many of our meetings focused on a topic proposed by the 'facilitator of the week'.

### 4.4.2 Mutual support and experimentation

The common denominators to all our meetings were a climate of mutual support and openness to experimentation. Examples of topics we discussed are conflict; honesty; compassion; trauma; leadership; dreams; rituals; activism; identity. Sometimes, the prompt was just a word or a sentence, while other times the facilitator had prepared a structure of practical exercises, games, or probing questions. We also periodically shared our experience in applying principles of reciprocity, mutual aid and mutual support in our organisations or projects and the difficulties and successes of fostering more intimate, relational ways of working with our colleagues or collaborators.

In addition to the weekly meetings, most of us were occasionally scheduling one-on-one conversations to get to know each other better or discuss specific topics. For example, after a group discussion which I found particularly difficult and emotional, Nora offered her support through a one-on-one chat. This was followed by more calls; eventually, we developed a shared ritual to make sense of relational entanglements by knotting a piece of yarn in conversation and brought it back to the group in the following session in the form of a facilitated activity.


*Figure 4.6 A mind map of my conversation with Nora, November 2020.*

While we were not meeting with the specific intention of creating projects together, three months into our collective practice Sophie made a proposal for a concrete project we could work on together: she wanted to organise an online event on environmental and social justice applying the principles of solidarity we had practised in our recurring sessions. We dedicated two of our usual weekly meetings to this topic; not everyone in the group, however, had the capacity to take part. Eventually, Poe decided not to participate in the organisation of the event, so we scheduled extra sessions to plan and produce the workshop without sacrificing our usual meeting time. This was the first collaboration between group members on a concrete project besides our weekly practice; some (particularly Nora and Sophie) then went on collaborating on other initiatives.

Over the course of the following months, we deepened our relationship and started sharing more personal aspects of our life. The time dedicated to structured practice and tools was gradually replaced by unstructured conversations where we held space for each other not only to discuss topics of interest, but also to process events in our life, emotions, and personal relationships with people outside of our group. Some of us also took longer breaks from the group meetings to focus on work, education, or personal matters.

In March 2021, about eight months into our practice, I presented the initial results of this research project to the group, gathering their impressions on the Framework for Relational Literacy. To do so, I followed the structure described in § 3.4 and explained that the Framework was informed, among other things, by my involvement with the Practice Group and by the shifts in perspective this practice had brought.

The analysis of notes for the purpose of this research stopped on the 17th of June 2021, but meetings with the Practice Group officially ended in October 2021, when the personal and work circumstances of many group members changed. We considered meeting less frequently, but ultimately decided to bring the experience to a close. The space we created was one of mutual support and practice, although modes and frequency of interaction changed throughout the experience: for example, the attendance to our group meetings gradually reduced, but some dyadic relationships deepened or transformed into professional collaborations.

### 4.4.3 A note on Internet relationships

My involvement with the Practice Group allowed me to continue this research project even during social distancing by offering an online context to collaboratively reflect on relational approaches to designing social innovation. Contrarily to the other two contexts of practice I have described, I have never met the people involved in *Mutual aid relational practices* in person: all our interactions took place online and it is unlikely that we will meet all together.

The unprecedented switch to online-only interactions brought by the pandemic requires a reflection on the differences between building relationships online and in person and whether online relationships can be considered ‘authentic’ and commensurable to in-person ones. Many scholars agree that evaluations of authenticity are dependent on the subjective perception of participants and observers (Scannell, 2001; Slater, 2002; Van Leeuwen, 2001) and research has shown mixed results in assessing whether virtual relationships are comparable to offline relationships in terms of meaning, intimacy, stability, and contribution to wellbeing (Ellison et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2011; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Towner et al., 2021; Whitty, 2008). Discourse around authenticity and the lack of a physical dimension to our interactions was frequent in our Practice Group; however, we also often discussed difficulties in constructing meaningful, stable relationships in our local contexts. While I acknowledge that online-only relationships might have different dynamics from in-person ones, it would be difficult to establish a cause-effect link between the surfacing of specific dynamics in the Practice Group and our means of communication: in a relationship, there are countless variables at play which configure the specificity of each interaction.

### 4.4.4 Summary and key learnings from *Mutual aid relational practices*

My experience in the Practice Group had an impact on my perspective and positionality with respect to relationships in my practice. It constituted a unique research setting where participants discussed relationships while building a relationship; yet, despite our increased awareness of relational dynamics within the group, there still were some tacit dimensions that I noticed analysing our collaborative notes and reflecting on the experience. Having established a point of trust and intimacy, smaller groups and dyads formed to work on more specific projects; coming together regularly in this way brought depth to relationships, uncovered common interests, and sparked more outcome-oriented action. Structure – in the form of regular meeting times, retrospectives and specific activities dictating modes of interaction – was helpful to get past the initial stages of uncertainty but was progressively abandoned as the relationship developed.

## 4.5 External practices

As detailed in Chapter 3, I engaged with DSI initiatives in different contexts in Asia Pacific with the aim to develop different lenses to interrogate my practice. Through a partnership with DESIAP (Designing Social Innovation Asia Pacific) I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews with ten practitioners working in different countries in the region; I recruited two additional participants through my personal contacts.

Participants work in different countries: Aotearoa New Zealand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Thailand. The scope of their organisations varies greatly, as do their roles: some work within design studios and innovation consultancies; others are part of or collaborate with governmental agencies; others work within incubators of social enterprises; others yet in academia. Table 4.5 lists participants with their related role and context of work; their names were replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

*Table 4.5 List of participants*

| Name (pseudonym) | Professional role | Scope of organisation / project / activity |
|---|---|---|
| Anne | Director of Philanthropy | Grant-making foundation |
| Thomas | Executive creative director | Design and branding studio working with social innovation initiatives |
| Gloria | Executive director | Social innovation project within an academic and research institution |
| Victor | Co-founder | Social enterprise incubator (1) |
| Carlo | Co-founder | Social enterprise incubator (2) |
| Rose | Venture support director | Social enterprise incubator (2) |
| Lamai | Co-founder | Social innovation design consultancy |
| Lucy | Co-design lead | Government-led project |
| Leon | Co-founder | Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives |
| Alba | Co-founder | Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives |
| Keiko | Co-founder and managing director | Company collaborating with government to create social innovation ecosystems |
| Somchai | University lecturer | Working on social innovation projects with students |

### 4.5.1 Data collection

**Interviews**

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews performed through a VOIP (voice over IP) call through Skype or Zoom. Each conversation lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes depending on the availability of the interviewee and on the time spent in introductions and informal chat. The conversations were loosely based on an interview guide I shared with participants prior to the interview (see § 3.3.2).

The interviews opened with a short explanation of who I am, what the research project is about and how I came to it. I also asked the participants if they had any questions or concerns before I started to record. In some instances, the conversation started as a casual chat which then I had to interrupt to ask if I could start recording. After a few 'icebreaker' questions, where I asked participants about their work in general, we talked about the relationships they cultivate daily as part of their work, about specific features of their work relationships, the challenges they encounter, the attributes of a 'good' relationship, and the methods, techniques and tools used to build and nurture relationships. I let the conversation flow, noting down follow-up questions that came to my mind and going back to them as it felt appropriate. This allowed me to maintain a conversational tone throughout the interview. After the interview, the recording was available for download to both the participant and me through the VOIP platform. I also shared the transcriptions of the recording with the participants once they were ready.

**Field visit**

In addition to the interviews just described, with the help of Thomas, I arranged a field trip in Thailand and Malaysia between December 2019 and January 2020. I visited some of the projects Thomas and his collaborators were working on and met relevant people from different social innovation initiatives that were supported by his design and branding studio. Table 4.8 below summarises the projects and people involved.

*Table 4.6 List of participants (fieldwork)*

| Description of project | Name of practitioner (pseudonym) | Country |
|---|---|---|
| Orphanage and Buddhist centre | Ajahn Thanh | Thailand |
| Community garden | Junwu | Malaysia |
| Foundation providing education and care for urban poor children | Pastor Hosea | Malaysia |
| Community-based cultural and creative hub | Tam | Malaysia |

Fieldwork in Thailand and Malaysia was supposed to be a precursor to more and deeper engagements with other projects and initiatives, in collaboration with practitioners who participated in the interviews. While further fieldwork was postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, relevant data from this field visit were collected in the form of notes and a collaborative map created during a conversation with Thomas and his collaborators. These data were significant for the construction of the third theme of the Framework for Relational Literacy – 'Building a shared relational identity'. In particular, they were useful to exemplify the construction of shared identities in an intimacy orientation (Kasulis, 2002; see § 2.7.1). Section 9.2.1 provides further details on this process.

## 4.6 Summary of activity and data collection

In this chapter, I have presented the three contexts of my personal practice as well as the external practices involved in the research. I have also described the type of data collected during research activity.

Three different contexts constitute the field where I collected data on my practice. In *Building belonging in schools,* I focused on my relationship with key collaborator Dario, with whom I developed an existing partnership as we worked together on a specific project, with a clear set of goals and expected outcomes. In *Partnership building for local action*, I focused on my relationship with fellow volunteer Greta, with whom I navigated the difficulties and joys of finding project opportunities for a network of local community centres and its members. In *Mutual aid relational practices*, together with four other participants, I focused on constructing trust and intimacy in an online setting; though we did not aim specifically at creating any concrete opportunities for collaboration, these emerged from our interaction.

From September 2018 to June 2021, I collected data on the relationships I developed within these three contexts, in the form of recorded conversations, reflection-on-action logs, diary entries, and an archive of emails and text messages.

During the first year of research, I also collected data from interviews with DSI practitioners in Asia Pacific and field research in Thailand and Malaysia. Datasets were then elaborated and analysed with the methods described in Chapter 5; the data collected in interviews with DSI practitioners in Asia Pacific informed the interrogation of my practice in Italy and online. I weaved the results of the data analysis into the Framework presented in Chapters 6-10.

Having introduced all contexts of practice and external practices and their respective modes of data collection, I now move on to an account of how the collected data were processed and analysed.

# Chapter 5. Data analysis

In this chapter, I outline the approach taken to analyse and synthesise the data from my personal practice and the interviews with design practitioners (§ 5.1). I explain how I have processed the raw data for further analysis and describe the stages of construction of an (auto)ethnographic narrative (§ 5.2), code generation, identification, and refinement of the themes (§ 5.3).

## 5.1 Approach to data analysis

To analyse the data, I have combined reflexive ethnography and autoethnograpy (Adams et al., 2015; Davies, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997) with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The two datasets (the data collected through practice, and the data collected through interviews with practitioners in Asia Pacific) were taken through different steps of analysis, as summarised in Table 5.9 below: while conversations with collaborators, reflection-on-action logs and diary entries were used to construct an overall narrative of my personal practice, interviews with external practices were taken through subsequent stages of coding, leading to the identification and construction of themes. These were then revised in conversation with participants and collaborators. Eventually, the data were organised into a Framework which is described in Chapter 6.

*Table 5.1 Summary of data analysis*

| **Stage of analysis** | **Datasets** | |
|---|---|---|
| [Data collection] | Conversations with collaborators, reflection-on-action logs, diary entries | Interviews with external practices |
| 1 | Construction of narrative of personal practice | Transcription |
| 2 | | 1st stage coding |
| 3 | | 2nd stage coding |
| 4 | Identification and construction of themes | |
| 5 | Collaborative revision of themes | |
| 6 | Production of the final report | |

## 5.2 The construction of the narrative of personal practice

As described in Chapter 4, my reflective practice was often conducted in dialogue with colleagues and collaborators. I used different modes of data collection: audio recording or note taking during conversation; reflection-on-action logs and diary entries; and an archive of emails and text messages.

I began the analysis by collating the data for each context and putting it in chronological order to have a sense of how relationships developed over time. Then, I used all recordings, notes, and other pieces of text to construct an account of my experience as a designer building relationships within the selected projects. The aim was to construct a nuanced account of relational approaches to DSI reflecting my positionality not only as a researcher, but also as a practitioner operating in a cultural paradigm. As I practised and reflected on my practice, I looked for dynamics of intimacy or integrity (Kasulis, 2002; see § 2.7.1) at play in interactions with colleagues, collaborators, and project partners. I began to identify where these dynamics clashed or overlapped, and what effect they had on my perception of my practice. I further refined my lens through the analysis of interviews with practitioners in Asia Pacific (described in § 5.3).

This reflexive approach included retrospectively identifying salient incidents and "epiphanies" (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989) stemming from being part and working within a familiar context while interacting with design practitioners from diverse contexts. Autoethnographic research methods see the construction of a narrative as research *in itself* – not just as the account of a research process. Ellis et al. (2011) write about epiphanies as evidence of how a person might negotiate the meaning of "effects that linger—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished" (Bochner, 1984, p. 595). Keeping a diary of my interactions, recording and re-listening to conversations, and reflecting on my experience was essential to identify patterns of cultural experience, repeated feelings, stories, and happenings which, together with the analysis of interviews with practitioners, shaped and enriched the themes presented in Chapters 7-9. I frequently went back to the literature to refine concepts and explore hunches and intuitions; I integrated excerpts of conversations and diary entries to evidence the themes; eventually, I organised them into a Framework that reflects the interplay of my experience with that of practitioners working in Asia Pacific countries and contexts.

I will leave the discussion and interpretation to Section Three of this thesis, while examples of diary entries and evocative autoethnographic writing are included in the Appendix. Now, I move to the description of the thematic analysis performed on the interviews' dataset, the interviews undertaken to revise the themes, and the organisation of themes into a Framework.

## 5.3 Thematic analysis

I used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2016; 2019) to analyse the data collected through interviews with practitioners in Asia Pacific. The data amounted to 14 hours of audio; I transcribed the interviews with the aid of a professional transcription service and checked for anonymity to preserve the identity of the participants. Once the transcription was complete, I printed and read interview transcriptions multiple times, initially while listening to the recordings. This allowed me to become familiar with the content and the detail of the exchange between the participants and myself. The process involved making casual notes, noticing possible connections and peculiarities that might add nuance to later coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A detailed explanation of the coding process is provided in the Appendix.

### 5.3.1 First-stage coding

I performed a first round of inductive coding manually in multiple takes, each using a different colour code, referencing notes taken during familiarisation to identify specific portions of data and give them clear labels. I coded with an inductive orientation, that is, starting from the data itself rather than approaching it with existing theories (Terry et al., 2017). I am aware, however, that personal knowledge and perception cannot be completely excluded from the coding process. I maintained this awareness as I moved from semantic coding – recording explicit meaning, staying close to the participants' terminology and speech – towards more latent coding (Braun et al., 2019), which welcomes the identification of underlying meanings stemming from the researcher's interpretative choices throughout the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

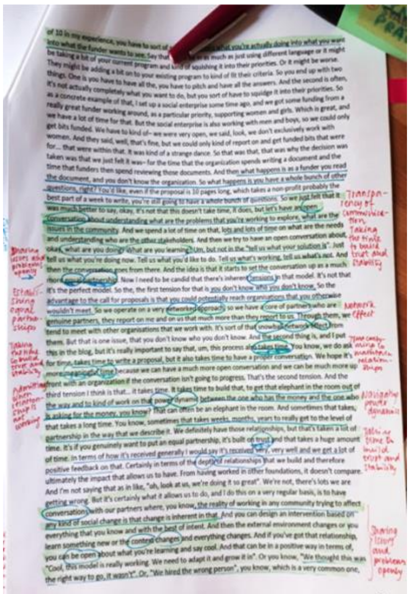

*Figure 5.1 A picture of an interview excerpt taken through first-stage coding.*

### 5.3.2 Second-stage coding

A second iteration of the coding process involved transferring all codes to sticky notes, noting the instances where the code occurred in the interviews and comparing the codes looking for redundancies, lack of clarity, lack of depth. In this phase, I turned to the literature to refine the codes, terminology, and concepts around relationships. Some codes were eliminated or merged in the process; I then transferred the resulting set of codes to Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, where each code could be linked to specific 'chunks' of text, making it easier to retrieve quotes. While data analysis software was helpful to organise the data for storage purposes, I chose to perform the analysis manually rather than using the software's features. The initial close reading of the data showed that different participants used different words, and sometimes examples, periphrases, and expressions in other languages, to describe their experiences and features of their work. Consistently with the experience of Tan (2012) and Warwick (2015), I found that the rigidity of data analysis software did not allow me to capture the nuance in the data, thus I preferred a manual coding method.


*Figure 5.2 A picture of codes on sticky notes, arranged on a poster to facilitate comparison.*

### 5.3.3 The construction of themes

Once I identified a tentative set of codes, I printed each code on a single card and arranged the codes into different thematic maps (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic maps are visual tools used to map a developing analysis and identify interconnections between themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60). As a first mapping exercise, I created clusters of codes based on affinity and the sense that they were describing a process of relationship building (see Fig. 5.3). The exercise was helpful in identifying codes that acted as a central organising idea for other codes – making them potential candidates to become themes.

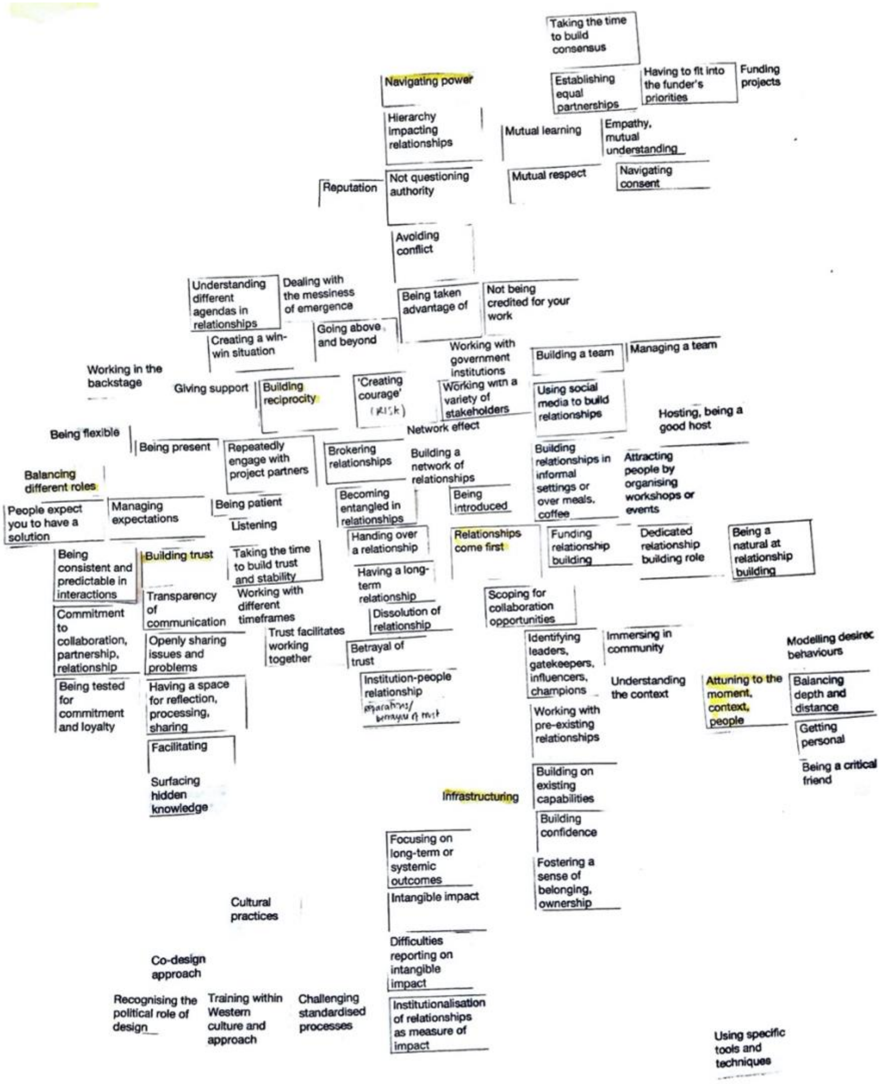


*Figure 5.3 A first attempt to code by affinity, with tentative codes-become-themes highlighted in yellow*

However, constructing thematic maps did not return a clear image of how codes could be associated to describe a particular aspect of relationship formation in DSI. I therefore formulated the following set of questions:

- What are the characteristics of (positive) relationships in DSI?
- What strategies are used to get there?
- What are the principles or values guiding the strategies?
- What contextual aspects did practitioners have to deal with when using these strategies?
- What actions are performed to carry out the strategies?
- What are the (predicted or unpredicted) outcomes of these actions?

The questions above expand on the research questions guiding this research (focusing on how relationships are defined and described in DSI, and what approaches and strategies allow specific aspects of relationality to surface). They also link back to the literature review on relationship building in work settings (§ 2.3) and to the emerging themes surrounding relationships in DSI described in § 2.5. In particular, the questions surrounding values and contextual aspects were, at this stage, informed by the work of Mohamad et al. (2015, 2018) on “heartware, […] the more subjective, nebulous, and humanistic dimension” (2018, p. 318) that encourages different stakeholders to collaborate acknowledging their values and promoting meaningful dialogue. Vyas and Young (2017) have also identified values that are important to teamwork in design for social innovation and framed them as a “situational remedy” (2017, p. 16) that must be traded off by designers working in DSI, based on the project context and contingencies.

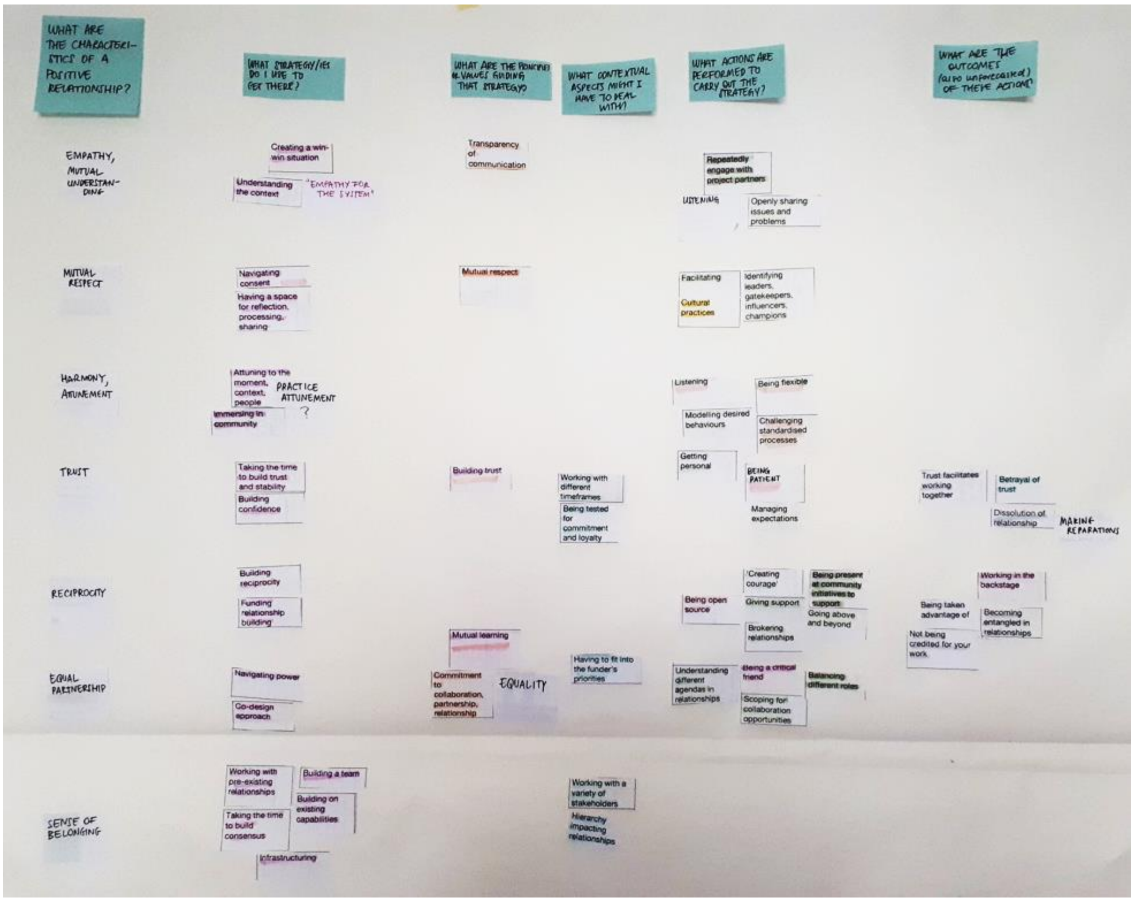

*Figure 5.4 A picture of the codes organised to answer specific questions.*

I used the questions to guide the thematic analysis, mapping the codes in response to them (see Fig. 5.4) and identifying where tentative themes overlapped, signalling a need to review and refine the scope of the central organising concept. For example, when I initially arranged the codes based on the description of a relationship building process, I identified ‘trust’ as a central organising concept. However, by arranging the codes in response to the set of questions above, I could identify the recurrence of ‘mutuality’, a concept where many of the features of relationships, including trust, overlapped. This led to determining ‘Establishing and maintaining mutuality’ as one of the three themes, with ‘mutual trust’ being one of its features, among others. The analysis of how trust is built in relationships then led to the identification of ‘reciprocity’ as a second organising concept, and to the construction of the theme ‘Building a system of reciprocity’.

In this phase, I developed an initial description of tentative themes and checked them against the whole dataset. I took the chance to write a paper to present to the Design Research Society conference (DRS2020) to describe two themes that I had identified as particularly promising and rich: ‘establishing mutuality’ and ‘building reciprocity’ (Petrella et al., 2020). Reporting on themes is not merely a writing-up exercise, but is in fact a test of how the themes’ prototypes work as well as a form of peer review (Braun et al. 2019, p. 857). Writing the paper was a great opportunity to make connections to existing research and literature that offered insight into the analysis, while preparing the visuals for the paper presentation gave me the chance to revisit the thematic maps and visualise themes in relation to each other and to the overall narrative. However, while writing the paper I chose against reporting on all the themes I had identified through thematic mapping. I felt the need to further engage with the data to refine and review the third theme, and make sure I was adequately capturing the data (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 66). This brought me back to the thematic maps and to re-reads of the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 65). I attempted the construction of another thematic map based on the relationship building process, which I then discarded when I concluded that the process is not linear (this aspect is discussed in § 9.1.2). I further considered the tentative themes of ‘harmony, attunement’ and ‘sense of belonging’ that I had identified during the second mapping exercise, until I felt the third theme, which I named ‘Building a shared relational identity’, was adequately defined – with references to ‘individuality’ and ‘attunement’ as key sub-themes. In the process of defining the third theme, I encountered literature that offered a more nuanced perspective on the sub-theme of ‘mutual trust’, which led me to add a reference to psychological safety.

The refinement of themes continued with collaborative revision (which involved participants in this research), the construction of the narrative of personal practice and the production of Chapters 6-10 of this thesis. These phases presented more chances to challenge, nuance and polish the themes, finalise their names, and organise the structure of their content to tell an overall story (Braun & Clarke 2012, p. 66).

### 5.3.4 The collaborative revision of themes

The next stage of the research was to present the themes to participants as a form of peer-review or validation. To do so, I invited practitioners in Asia Pacific to participate in a follow-up interview; I also involved collaborators Dario and Greta and members of the Practice Group. A full list of participants in this stage of the research is shown in Table 5.2 below.

*Table 5.2 List of participants in the collaborative revision of themes*

| Context / organisation | Pseudonym of participant | Job title or role | Mode of engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Building belonging in schools | Dario | Project manager and consultant for the Training Centre | Individual interview |
| Partnership building for local action | Greta | Member of the Board | Individual interview |
| Mutual aid relational practices | Nora | Member of the Practice Group; designer | Focus group interview |
| Mutual aid relational practices | Poe | Member of the Practice Group; engineer | Focus group interview |
| Mutual aid relational practices | Sophie | Member of the Practice Group; sustainability consultant | Focus group interview |
| Mutual aid relational practices | Eric | Member of the Practice Group; web developer working for a charity | Focus group interview |
| Grant-making foundation | Anne | Director of Philanthropy | Individual interview |

| Context / organisation | Pseudonym of participant | Job title or role | Mode of engagement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social enterprise incubator | Rose | Venture support director | Individual interview |
| Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives | Alba | Co-founder | Pair interview (with Leon) |
| Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives | Leon | Co-founder | Pair interview (with Alba) |
| Working on social innovation projects with students | Somchai | University lecturer | Individual interview |

*Table 5.2 (continued) List of participants in the collaborative revision of themes*

To ensure consistency, I prepared a short video presenting the themes organised in what I named a 'Framework for Relational Literacy', presented through a diagram highlighting the relationships between themes and subthemes. The method of data collection, other than recording the call, was based on collaborative annotation on the Framework itself using a digital visual collaboration platform. Participants and I discussed their first impressions of the Framework; whether some parts particularly resonated with them or did not match their experience; the relevance of the Framework to their work experience; and the language associated with some of the dynamics described in the accompanying video. Links to the video presented to participants are included in the Appendix.

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and analysed using the same method as previous interviews (Thematic Analysis), aiming to further nuance the understandings of themes through dialogue.

## 5.4 Summary of data analysis

This section has described the process of analysing the data collected through the researcher's personal practice and during interviews with design practitioners working in social innovation initiatives in the Asia Pacific region. It has reported on the construction of a narrative of the researcher's experience and practice (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and has offered an account of the construction of themes following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019). To construct the themes, I have used different tools and methods such as manual coding, visual mapping, reporting, collaborative revision, autoethnographic writing, and selecting salient excerpts to construct an overall narrative of the data. Figure 5.5 below summarises the data analysis process.

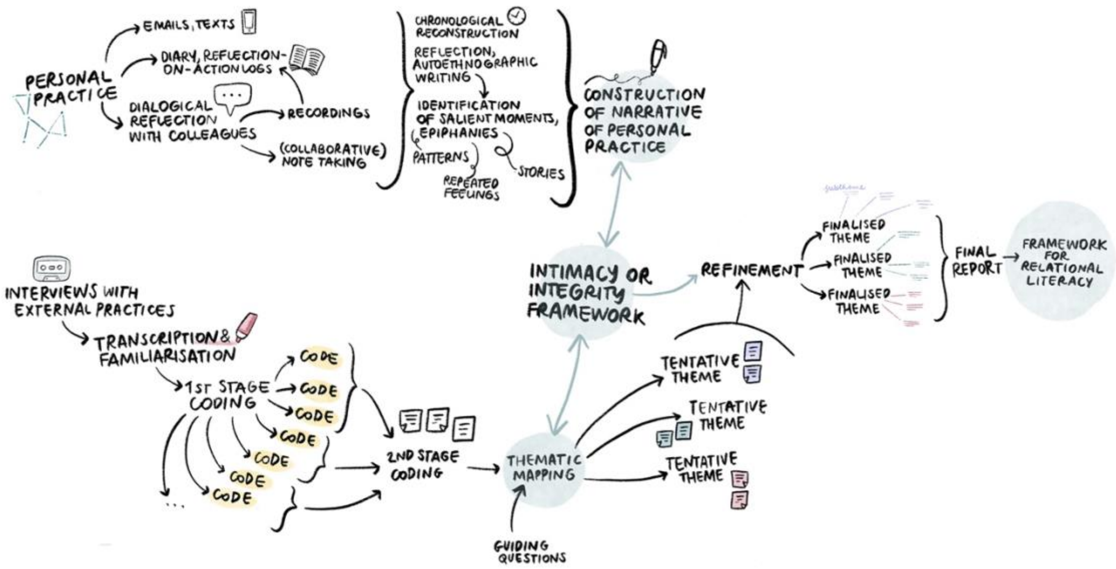


*Figure 5.5 Diagram summarising the data analysis process*

In the next section, I present and discuss the themes identified during the analysis and describe their relationship, organising them into the Framework for Relational Literacy and providing a nuanced account of relationship formation and development in design and social innovation.

# Section Three: Discussion and Interpretation

The previous section of this thesis outlined the personal practice and the external practices involved in the research, the process of data collection and the approach used to interrogate the gathered data. Section Three now presents how the analysis of conversations with practitioners and reflective design practice allowed for the identification of a system of relationship attributes, constructing a multifaceted account of relationship formation and development in designing social innovation.

Chapter 6 introduces the Framework for Relational Literacy. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 weave together the themes and sub-themes identified during the data analysis. Chapter 10 looks at the Framework in its entirety, describe the uses for it and discusses its limitations. Chapter 11 draws conclusions to this thesis.

# Chapter 6. A Framework for Relational Literacy

The analysis presented in Chapter 5 found that relationships in the context of designing social innovation are associated with building a system of reciprocity; establishing and maintaining mutuality; and building a shared relational identity. For each theme, I have identified specific features, so that themes and subthemes are interwoven into what I have named a ‘Framework for Relational Literacy’.

Before describing each theme, it is important to outline the intended meaning of the expression ‘relational literacy’. It draws on notions of ‘relational practice’ found in nursing and feminist work theory (Doane, 2002, 2014; Fletcher, 1998, 1999) and in Indigenous methodologies and approaches to research and design (Sheehan, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Relationality has also been discussed in the context of infrastructuring (see § 2.4.2) as a means to design, reveal, or challenge systems made up of complex and ever changing socio-material relationships (Bannon & Ehn, 2013; Bjögvinsson et al., 2012; DiSalvo et al., 2012; Karasti, 2014; Star & Ruhleder, 1994) while foregrounding the embodied, local and emergent practices of participatory design (Agid, 2011; Akama, 2015; Akama et al., 2015; Light & Akama, 2012; Suchman, 2002; see § 2.7.2). The word ‘literacy’ here pertains to communicative competence across different domains of life (Brandt, 2018) with practices being integrated into people’s every day, situated in social, cultural, historical, and political relationships and embedded in structures of power. Building on the work of Wilson (2008), Stavenhagen (2019, p. 117) proposes relational literacy as “as a communal process and a way of building knowledge” that configures the context, the environment, and ourselves as part of it, as “a set of presence-based relationships” (2019, p. 120). Building relational literacy refers to a mix of self-reflection; collective sense-making; dialogue; embodied and situated knowledge; and awareness.

## 6.1 Recalling the *Intimacy or Integrity* framework

It is useful here to recall Kasulis’s *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002) introduced in § 2.1.7 and explain its relationship with the Framework for Relational Literacy.

Kasulis (2002) discusses “integrity” and “intimacy” as two cultural orientations that constitute a “complementary gestalt” (Akama & Yee, 2016, p. 10):

- An integrity orientation views relationships as external and not affectively charged. Knowledge is regarded as objective and public; its somatic component is not emphasised; it is ideally empty of affect, reflective, and grounded in reason.
- An intimacy orientation views relationships as internal and affectively charged. Knowledge is objective, but non-public; it has a somatic and affective dimension; it is not rationally explainable, but rather grounded in lived experience.

Kasulis states that the intimacy and integrity orientations describe cultural patterns that repeat themselves at different scales and determine different ways of relating. Akama & Yee (2016) highlight the significance of the intimacy and integrity framework for designing social innovation, sharing how an orientation that foregrounds one over the other can shape the way DSI projects are conceived, developed, promoted, and evaluated.

As stated in § 2.1.7, a key aspect of the *Intimacy or Integrity* framework for this research is its emphasis on the fact that the two cultural orientations have different perspectives on what are the most relevant characteristics of a phenomenon. Societies, however, are not culturally homogeneous; therefore, intimacy is often found at the periphery of experience in an integrity-dominant culture, and vice versa.

The Framework for Relational Literacy is intended to build a nuanced account of relationship building in DSI, challenging constructions of design literacy as rooted in integrity, which support a pedagogy that normalises certain practices, postures, and people, and considering the significance of an intimacy orientation for DSI. Thus, the *Intimacy or Integrity* framework can be used as a lens to observe the themes presented in the following chapters.

## 6.2 My positionality, the Framework's representation, its limitations

Uses for and limitations of the Framework are further discussed in Chapter 10, but it is useful to introduce them here, together with a comment on my positionality, to offer a lens to view the contents of the Discussion section.

The conversations and experiences presented in this research could only meet my level of readiness and my existing relationships. In many ways, I have benefited from the universalised models I aim to question. My design education has aligned with the onto-epistemological context I have been immersed in for my whole life; the design standards I was taught are those by which DSI initiatives are evaluated globally. My own positionality means that I simultaneously have a responsibility to question the dominant paradigm and feel undermined to speak about literacies that belong to other places and worldviews. The dialogues and propositions that this chapter accounts for were developed in multiple and diverse encounters with people from different places, cultures, and backgrounds, in which I could perceive familiar and unfamiliar patterns. The Framework is therefore an ongoing and complex interplay of conversations, experiences, events, and encounters.

It is also of value to briefly focus our attention on how the Framework for Relational Literacy is represented and described. Figure 6.1 is a diagram illustrating the Framework: it aims to represent themes and subthemes in a way that is approachable and understandable and to provide some structure for its narration. Yet, depicting a more or less neat arrangement of parts and illustrating the ways they work together is inevitably a mechanistic reduction.

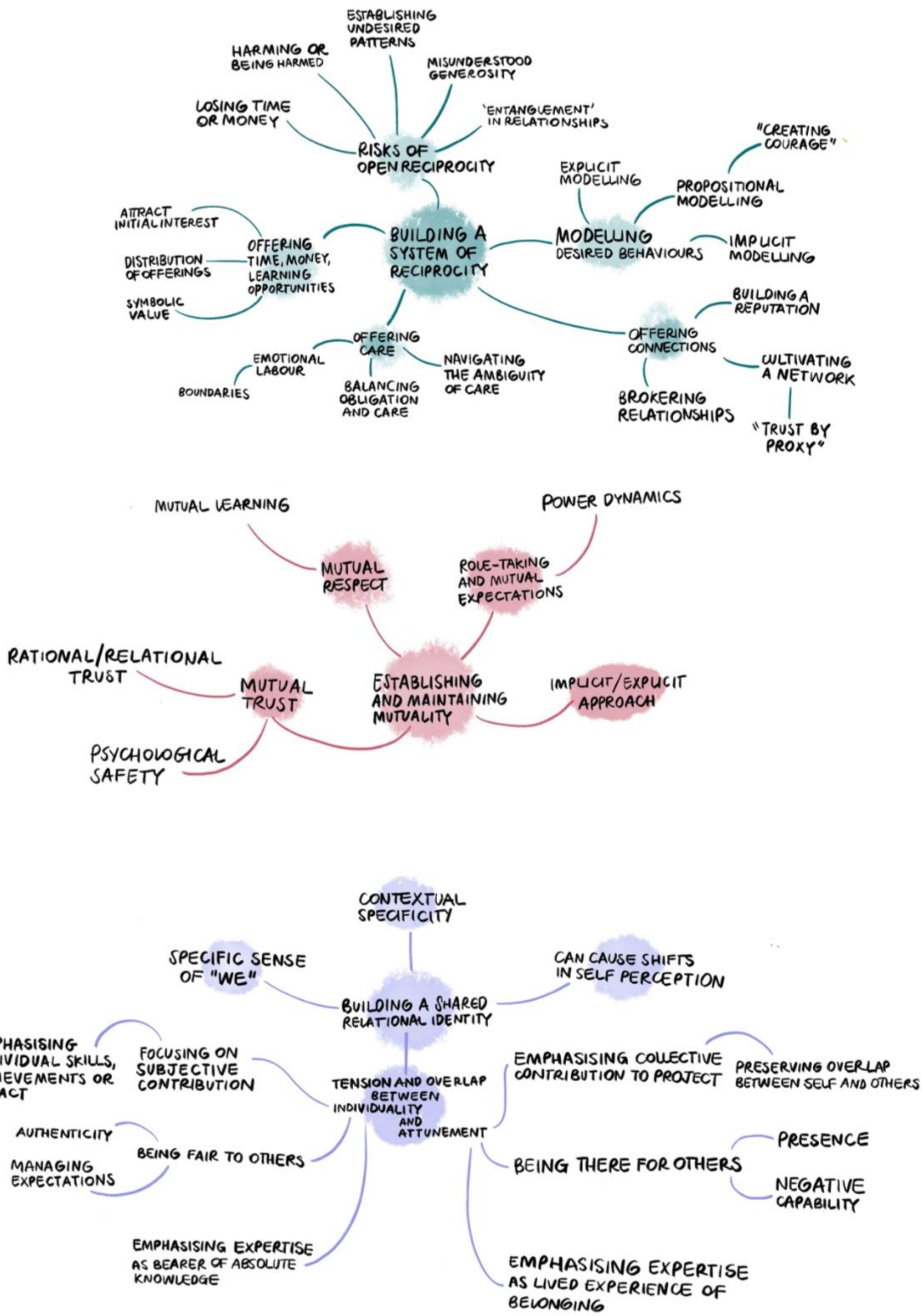


*Figure 6.1 Diagram illustrating the three themes of the Framework for Relational Literacy*

The Framework for Relational Literacy is to be approached in context. By ‘context’ here I refer to “the whole structure of connections between components that gives components their meaning” (Özbilgin & Kyriakidou, 2006, p. 5). Context is not ‘found’ inside the ‘parts’ of a system, but is continuously created in interaction (Bateson, 2015, p. 5): it is a system of relationships that creates meaning. Yet, when approached in context, the ‘parts’ the Framework is composed of are hardly distinguishable as parts; even the boundaries of the Framework were drawn in a way that is convenient to this research. Conceptualising the Framework as an arrangement of parts might induce someone to attribute to each part some individual agency when, in fact, none of the parts can exert individual action (ibid.): relationships in DSI necessarily evolve within their context, and simultaneously constitute the context in which they take place.

For these reasons, the Framework is not to be interpreted as a model of relational practice, as an ideal set of skills, or as a manual of techniques: welcoming relationality requires us to recognise that models do not work outside of specific contexts (Wilson, 2008, p. 136). Likewise, I do not wish to suggest that relational literacy is brought into the design process by designers, facilitators, or other experts; and certainly, relationality is more than just the sum of the themes I present here, as it permeates our projects, our communities, and the lives of all beings, human and nonhuman. Rather than searching for common patterns and models, the Framework aims to broaden our view of design while acknowledging our interrelatedness.

## 6.3 Structure of Chapters 7-9

The following chapters explore relational literacy as a way to develop awareness and foster dialogue around a variety of experiences of relating in DSI. Table 6.1 introduces the three main themes developed in Chapters 7 to 9.

Chapters 7 and 8 are roughly structured as follows: firstly, I introduce the theme, situate it in the relevant literature, and offer definitions of key terms; then, I bring the theme to life by elaborating on specific sub-themes. To do so, I offer examples from conversations with practitioners and colleagues, and from reflections on my experience working in the contexts of practice described in § 4.1 – 4.4.

Since the theme presented in Chapter 9 is more complex than the previous two, the chapter is organised slightly differently, with more space devoted to definition and contextualisation of key terms, followed by rich descriptions of sub-themes and accounts of dialogical reflection with practitioners and colleagues.

*Table 6.1 Definitions of the three themes in the Framework for Relational Literacy*

| **Chapter** | **Theme** | **Description** |
|---|---|---|
| Chapter 7 | Building a system of reciprocity | The wealth of actions put in place to nurture a relationship, including material and emotional offerings, modelling behaviours, and brokering relationships. Actions are performed hoping, but not being certain, that they will be reciprocated. |
| Chapter 8 | Establishing and maintaining mutuality | The efforts made to continuously agree on what are the specific terms of a relationship. It involves the constant change of the relative position of parties. Core features are mutual trust, mutual respect, mutual learning, clarity on roles and mutual expectations. |
| Chapter 9 | Building a shared relational identity | The process of integrating personal qualities, characteristics, and roles into a new, collective identity. It is non-linear and deeply contextual, and can be observed through dialogue and in the tension between preserving individuality and attuning to others. |

# Chapter 7. Building a system of reciprocity

The first theme developed in the Framework for Relational Literacy is ‘Building a system of reciprocity’. In § 7.1 of this chapter, I offer a definition of ‘reciprocity’ in the context of this research by drawing on relevant literature. Sections 7.2 to 7.5 focus on different types of offerings made to establish a system of reciprocity: offering resources, care, connections, and modelling desired behaviours. Section 7.6 lists the ‘risks’ associated with generosity in an open reciprocity system. Sub-themes are nuanced through an account of practitioners’ experiences as well as my own.

## 7.1 Definition and contextualisation

The term ‘reciprocity’ has been used in literature to describe a continuum of forms of exchange. Sahlins (1965) describes reciprocity as ranging from self-interest (“negative reciprocity”), through respective exchanges (“balanced reciprocity”), to disinterested concern, or “generalised reciprocity”. This third type of transaction sees one party commit an act of generosity by offering or sharing something (resources, help, hospitality) without expecting a direct, material return. In generalised reciprocity, the sense of counter-obligation is “diffuse” (Sahlins 1965, p. 147): the donor trusts that the recipient will reciprocate when the donor will need it, and if they will be able to reciprocate. The nature and amount of the reciprocation can also be very different from what was initially given.

While the examples I propose in the following paragraphs can be ascribed to generalised reciprocity, in Sahlin’s analysis of “primitive societies”, this kind of open-ended responsibility prevails among close kin, while among people who are less close, balanced reciprocity, involving direct and equivalent return, is more common (Sahlins, 1965, p. 149). Graeber (2001, p. 220) suggests that rather than thinking of reciprocity as ‘generalised’ or ‘balanced’, it might be better to think of it as ‘open’ and ‘closed’: open reciprocity implies or establishes a permanent mutual commitment, while closed reciprocity suggests that the balancing of accounts would close the relationship off. Graeber (2001, p. 226) also warns against the risk of romanticising the ‘gifts’ given in a system of reciprocity as a counterbalance to the impersonal, socially isolated ways of capitalist societies: relations of open-ended reciprocity can easily slip into patronage and exploitation or turn into a competition for who is able to give more.

This contextualisation of reciprocity elicits two observations. Firstly, reciprocity does not only refer to material resources, but to more intangible offers as well – attention, care, emotional support, etcetera. Secondly, in the examined literature, generalised or open reciprocity between two actors is, in fact, not at all 'reciprocal' (Graeber, 2001, p. 277), but relies on one party offering resources and support hoping, but not expecting, that they will be reciprocated.

Observing reciprocity through the lens of *Intimacy or Integrity* (Kasulis, 2002), it is possible to identify some significant points of contact. 'Balanced' or 'closed' reciprocity emphasises balancing the give-and-take until a 'neutral' state is achieved. It relies on offerings being explicit and clear, so that the recipient knows what is given to them and is able to reciprocate precisely. This contractual approach reminds of the integrity orientation and its focus on public verifiability. Open reciprocity, on the other hand, is ambiguous by definition. As shown in the following paragraphs, precisely because the offering is not clear, or carries symbolic meaning, or elicits reciprocation with something of a different nature, the reciprocation cannot be precise or complete. It relies on intimations that are not publicly revealed or accessible to those who are not involved in the relationship. The 'openness' of this type of reciprocity refers not to the fact that it is open to anyone, but to the intention to keep the relationship open, ongoing, through a chain of reciprocal intimations of generosity and interest.

Practitioners described making offerings of material resources, knowledge, time, connections, and emotional availability; these supported the creation of a partnership characterised by intentional and stable collaboration. A partnership "doesn't happen overnight" (Anne): patience is required to build the base for a strong relationship, a process that Lucy described as "putting generosity into the system". As is shown in the following paragraphs, the practice of open reciprocity also comes with risks and potential drawbacks.

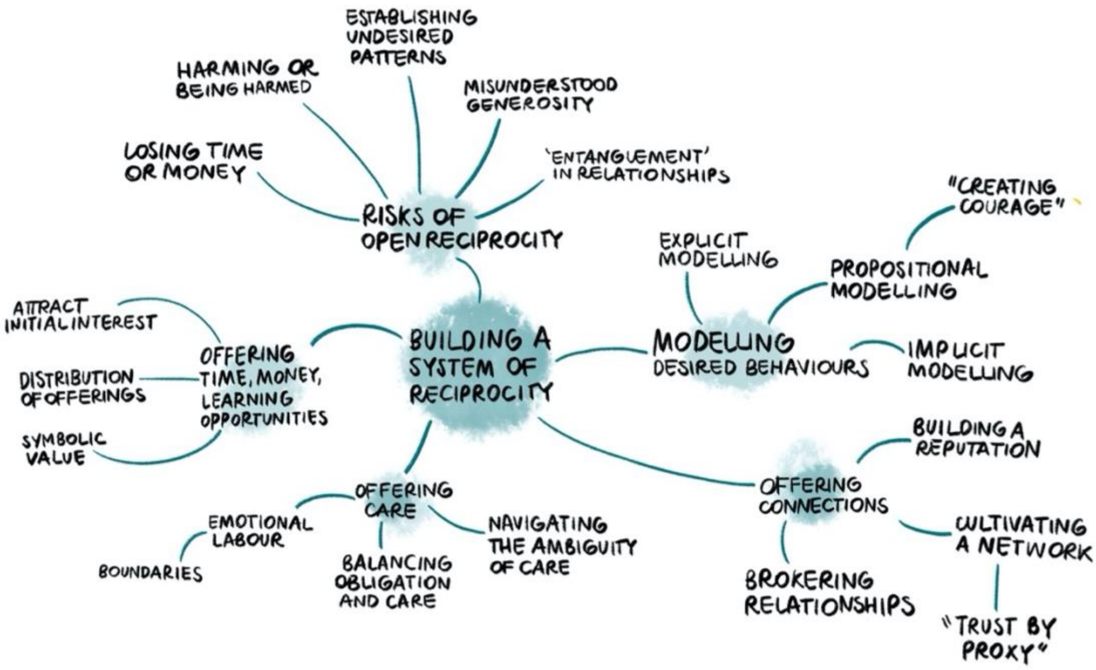


*Figure 7.1 Diagram of the theme 'Building a system of reciprocity' with its subthemes*

## 7.2 Offering time, money, learning opportunities

Practitioners reported investing significant amounts of time and money into the development of a partnership. Anne's foundation, for example, distributes early-stage grants to, "sort of crudely, [buy] time to build a stronger relationship and get to know each other better as people and organisations" (Anne). Thomas and Somchai also described devoting time to visiting communities repeatedly to build relationships, often bringing gifts, lending money to local initiatives and contributing to the economic life of the community by making purchases in local shops. One practitioner emphasised her willingness to put in extra work for an organisation, hoping that this would be reciprocated with more trust and creative freedom. While she was able to build a strong relationship with project partners who then referred her to other potential partners and clients (see § 7.4), she commented:

> *"[S]ometimes the relationship is a little bit strange, because I want to help them, but sometimes I do more work, like my team have to do more work [...] it's sometimes a little bit difficult to manage as well, because for example, I plan my scope of work for this, I would have to spend like 10*

*hours and do everything. But, in reality, we have to spend like 40 hours. So, it's been a little bit tough working and supporting them". (Lamai)*

Practitioners also reported organising events, training sessions or workshops, often for free, to help current partners and attract prospective ones. Beyond the formal workshops, practitioners try to go "above and beyond" (Lamai) to offer support to their project partners, for example by providing them with tailored assistance and personalised learning opportunities:

*"[...] If they have requests, then [you try] to fulfil them as [best] as possible [...] making sure that you have everything they need to succeed. It's small micro interactions with people, where you show that you go the extra step and just try to find out the best possible information for them, so if someone wants to connect to an expert on chicken farming then you try to get the best expert in chicken farming you have, so then you show that you're not just sending some online links [...] but you're actually trying to find the best quality information" (Victor)*

Providing material resources and learning opportunities, however, is not consistently successful in setting the base for a long-term relationship:

*"[S]ometimes people come because they want to learn about nudge or learn about design thinking. So, they [are] often not continuing, because they've met their objective. They just want to learn." (Lamai)*

Keiko explained that while offering training in the social innovation field attracts the initial interest of people "because of the skill sets and the visible curriculum part", they would often withdraw once they realised how "mentally demanding" the work would be and how much rejection and strain their social business would have to endure to take off.

Who the resources are offered to is also relevant. The *Building belonging in schools* project offered a (relatively small) budget to each school (see § 2.3.1). The money was destined exclusively for the renovation of spaces and the implementation of services, but teachers were not compensated for the time they put into the initiative. Dario described this as one of the weaknesses of the project: some teachers refused to be involved because of the prospect of having to work for free. We knew that we could not ask too much of the teachers involved, and that ultimately we would be responsible for the outcome of the project in each school, as we were being directly paid for our work.

Finally, it is important to note that offerings of time, money and learning opportunities have a symbolic value. This is perhaps the most important feature of all offerings, tangible or intangible: they symbolise the will to keep a relationship open. The opposite can also happen: when generosity is not displayed, this can be associated with a sentiment of distrust or hostility. For example, in the Community Centre, the Committee was not given a budget to organise events until several Board members started participating in its activities (see § 4.3.2); many volunteers associated this decision with a lack of trust in their decisions and proposals.

In summary, acts of generosity centred on material resources, time, or learning opportunities are a valuable relationship building strategy, but they may not be sufficient to elicit reciprocation. Once the resources are consumed, those involved might not be interested in exploring a collaboration; the resources might not circulate in the system enough to engage the right number of people; their symbolic value might be ignored or misunderstood. This aspect highlights the importance of other acts of generosity, such as offering care or personal connections.

## 7.3 Offering care

Practitioners described generosity in the form of care using various expressions. Leon talked about a certain poise in hosting meetings that involves "being gentle, being responsive to [the participants'] emotional context", while Keiko described her ability to offer care and support to her organisation's partners as key to develop a strong relationship that enables social entrepreneurs and innovators to persevere in their mission:

> *"[O]ur role is saying 'You can do it', or sometimes just saying, 'Are you okay?'. It's very simple. [...] I think there should be at least one person who says, 'Yeah you're doing well,' or somebody who doesn't criticize or reject or deny. And that single person is really difficult to have. Especially when the mission is so big. I think to be that person is quite important" (Keiko)*

Anne is a director of philanthropy, but beyond distributing funds to different projects, she offers care and presence, holding space for partners to share problems and look for solutions together:

> *"The money of course is vital, but it's much more about we then becoming a connector and actually often just a friend to have a glass of wine with and have someone to say, 'Oh my gosh, I'm really struggling with this.'" (Anne)*

Practices of care involve emotional labour, defined as the labour involved in dealing with other people's feelings (James, 1989). Hochschild (2012) describes emotional labour as not necessarily a mutual practice, but rather the work of one actor for another. This type of offering can go unnoticed, unrequited, or unpaid. Rose described responding to requests for help showing care, presence, and generosity without necessarily expecting a direct return. She and her colleague Carlo explained that these behaviours are crucial to relationship building in their organisation; however, she commented that:

> *"[E]ven if I don't expect anything, I would like to be thanked, and if I'm not thanked, then I'm so pissed off. [...] I will give and see what happens when I give. [...] [I]f they thank me, then I will [keep] on being generous." (Rose)*

Rose's comment suggests that boundaries and feedback in systems of reciprocity might be important to make sure that caring for others is sustainable. Alba spoke about the importance and difficulty of setting clear boundaries in shared projects:

> *"It's about being super explicit. [...] If I'm not saying, 'this is what I want', or 'this is what I need', [...] then it's easier to cross that [boundary]. [...] [A]sking for consent is easy. What I find tricky myself, is saying no when I actually don't want it." (Alba)*

Leon shared a strategy where giving negative feedback or setting a boundary served as an initial measure of a relationship:

> *"Someone will ask me for something, and I'll say no, and see how they respond. [...] [I]f they try and pressure me, then I'm like, right. Good to know." (Leon)*

However, setting boundaries is not always easy, particularly when the practitioner's roles and responsibilities are not clear-cut. One practitioner shared that, when working with communities, emotional labour can be so intense that her team wonders whether they should seek help and support:

> *"[W]here it starts to get tricky is where it becomes [...] almost like a social work practice [...] It's like, do we need supervision? [...] [H]ow will we help people to process what they're hearing? [W]hen you sit down and have a deep story with the families, and they tell you what they've been through, it's very heavy taking that on [...] [H]ow do we help the team to not fall into, you know, carrying the weight of those stories? [...] How do you make sure that we don't get caught up in it?" (Lucy)*

### 7.3.1 Balancing obligation and care

The practitioners' discourse highlights the interplay of two seemingly contrasting elements of building relationships in DSI: obligation and care. Light and Akama (2019) have written about care and obligation as lenses to examine ethics when designing with communities, detailing how the two perspectives can be complementary. Obligation (a duty to fulfil a specific role) can be present alongside a caring approach, where flexibility and responsiveness to the needs and emotions of the people involved are foregrounded.

While obligation and care *can* coexist, balancing them might not be easy. Practitioners reported difficulties in setting adequate boundaries or identifying thresholds for relationships. When discussing reciprocity with Greta, we realised that spontaneous acts of care among members of the Community Centre often went unrecognised or even unappreciated. For example, during the Board meeting that followed the suspension of the Committee (see § 4.3.4), I offered my perspective as a member of the Community Centre. I felt a desire to belong to the place and take care of it and of the people involved in it; but perhaps there were some issues with trust and power that needed to be addressed, I suggested. One Board member replied that, when working on shared projects, we should do our best to "leave the emotions at the door": my caring approach was deemed inappropriate, and I should stick to my role as a Committee member.

Kasulis's *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002) offers a lens to observe this episode. Discussing the normative dimensions of intimacy or integrity orientations, Kasulis observes that "integrity generates a morality of responsibility, whereas intimacy generates a morality of responsiveness" (2002, p. 120). From the perspective of the Board member cited above, our respective status as member of the Board and member of the Committee granted us different responsibilities and different rights; the same, external principles regulated the relationship between the Board and the Committee, and there was nothing else to discuss. My plea to reciprocal care and a contextual response to the changes brought by the creation of the Committee was not an effective call to action, as turning inwards and exploring the affective dimension of our collaboration would be considered a distraction from daily operations.

Greta and I discussed this episode many times. She acknowledged that, as a Board member, sometimes she resisted making the type of "emotional investment" that would require offering care and showing vulnerability, for fear of not being understood or reciprocated. We agreed that avoiding emotional investment was neither possible nor desirable: after all, we had emotionally invested in each other becoming collaborators and friends over the years. Still, there was a tension between being a Board member – with an official role, obligations, and a more 'managerial' approach – and participating in the Community Centre's activities to cultivate friendships and be part of the community. To Greta, showing care by offering money (donations) or time (volunteering) was easier, though more "individualistic", compared to the struggle of navigating the interplay between her official role and her caring approach. When we reviewed the Framework for Relational Literacy together, I asked her if she thought it was possible to balance them, instead of having to choose between them:

> *"Within a framework like the one you described, I think it is. But if there is an imbalance, if the system is not in equilibrium, it becomes toxic. You can't really see it from within the system because nobody shows you a different way from the one you have learned". (Greta)*

Eventually, Greta chose to step down from the Board of the Community Centre. Freed from the obligation to fulfil her role as a Board member (which granted her power and responsibilities), she could focus on cultivating personal relationships with other community members, on caring and being cared for.

### 7.3.2 Navigating the ambiguity of care

Similar to other acts of generosity in a system of open reciprocity, care is ambiguous and easy to misinterpret. It is profoundly situational and appeals to an intimate, affective core of connectedness that is not clarified into external contractual principles. Its characteristics are learned contextually and cannot be disentangled from the particular relationships where specific types of care are displayed.

When Dario and I first met, the nature of the relationship between us was very much based on him taking on a supporting, encouraging role in my regard. He showed interest in my organisation and my work, he dedicated time and energy to contribute to shared projects although it was clear there would not be an immediate return, and he offered me and other members of the organisation opportunities to learn from our work together. I was flattered by his attention and invigorated by our conversations, but our relationship developed so quickly that I could hardly make sense of it. While reconstructing the beginning of our relationship, I wrote in my diary:

> *"I cannot help but wonder what [Dario] gets from our relationship. He is an established professional; while he might find my organisation interesting, I do not understand why he is so generous with his time and advice. What's in it for him?"*

Years later, during one of our conversations, I asked Dario to share his perspective about the beginning of our relationship. He revealed that sometimes he feared that his interest and generosity would seem excessive in a professional context and that I would misinterpret them. We acknowledged that our relationship was based not only on reciprocity, but on our ability to navigate the ambiguity it brought, and to adapt to the changes in our relationship.

## 7.4 Offering connections

Often, building a system of reciprocity involves 'brokering' a relationship with a third person or welcoming the other party within one's personal and professional network. Sharing a contact can be beneficial to a relationship: triads have been studied for decades, demonstrating that dyadic relationships are strengthened if both parties are linked to the same third person (Heider, 1958; Krackhardt & Kilduff, 2002; Simmel, 1950), while more recent research uncovered the importance of social networks on dyadic relationships (Goodwin et al., 2009; Sparrowe & Liden, 2005). Though the partnership is strengthened through brokerage, Carlo explains that:

> *"[I]n the majority of cases, [building relationships] would not be a direct benefit for our company, but it would be, could be, a potential benefit for the entrepreneurs we are supporting, so for the real social innovators" (Carlo)*

Brokering relationships is a small but effective way to create a sense of obligation and encourage a system of open reciprocity. In the example below, Leon talks about meeting someone new:

> *[A]lmost every time [...] before they finish the conversation, I would have done them a favour, so like, 'Oh, I should introduce you to this person' or 'I've got this answer that you need'. [...] [T]here's some kind of tiny gesture which says, I'm going to give you something that I didn't have to give, that it's going to make you slightly better [off]. And that, then, [...] creates a very subtle obligation that the person might, through reciprocity, return the favour at a later date. (Leon)*

### 7.4.1 Offering connections to cultivate a network

Some practitioners declared having a specific mandate to be "the face of [the organisation]" (Rose) and maintain and expand a network of relationships. This network is fundamental to gather resources, exchange information, and offer social currency. As Carlo puts it, the breadth of his organisation's network allows him to activate connections and collaborations:

> *"It was just the sheer volume of these relationships that created this network effect [...] we were the centre of this complex ecosystem and web,*

*and people were coming to us to go somewhere else, and they were connecting to each other." (Carlo)*

Practitioners did not necessarily position themselves at the centre of a web of relationships. When reviewing the concept of "brokering relationships", Leon and Alba explained that, beyond welcoming people into a network and connecting them to others, it is also important to enable new members to expand the network; this is done by showing trust, acknowledging power dynamics, and consciously leaving space for others to show leadership:

*Leon: "Once you've been granted that key [to the network], you should be able to welcome other people [...] [Feel] empowered to be able to say, 'I'm going to hold a subgroup here', and because there is someone holding it, the whole can get bigger, because there's people looking after subparts [...]"*
*Alba: [F]irst, you need to have the trust of the other people [...] to hold that space, and they need to have as well a clear way to distribute power around that"*
*Leon: "[W]e have to engage some muscles to go like 'Oh, all of this attention is coalescing around this one person. And we have to actively do stuff to shift that'. Like talking about it, and being self-aware when you're in that position and going, 'Maybe I will just shut up for a minute and see what other people have to say'".*

Dario and I offered to broker or mediate the relationship between some schools and the local municipalities, particularly in cases where the relationship between them was tense or fractured. Simply *offering* support and connections encouraged one school to tackle a difficult conversation with their municipality. The project provided an excuse for the principal, teachers, and public administration officials to work together on a common goal, thus beginning to repair their relationship. In this context, Dario and I had consciously limited ourselves to offering support to the school if they might need it, trusting that they would come to an agreement with the municipality in their own time (the school also needed time to adapt to the Covid-19 emergency). Offering connections and care also meant navigating the contingencies of the situation and learning when to take a step back without retracting our support.

Other examples of offering connections to build a network were found in discussions with the Practice Group. Nora shared that, in her organisation, she was central to members building relationships, as not everyone in the organisation knew one another, but they all knew her. This dynamic became known in the organisation as "trust by proxy". Even the way that the Practice Group came together initially relied on the 'proxy' of Leon and Alba, who organised the training programme where we initially met, encouraged us to form Practice Groups and offered a platform where we could organise. It took Sophie's courage to be a convenor and call a Practice Group (taking the risk of being rejected or ignored) for our Group to form.

### 7.4.2 Offering connections to build a reputation

Practitioners reported reaping the benefits of offering connections in the long run, through a positive impact on their reputation. A good reputation is essential to many practitioners: having someone who can "vouch for the quality of [your] work" (Gloria) and being known as an open, transparent, "genuine" (Anne) and efficient partner is described as the gateway to new partnerships and collaborations. In Anne's foundation, project partners are introduced through "connections and kind of 'recommendations' [air quotes], or referrals, if you like, from other organisations". Gloria's organisation works similarly and, for a project to be funded, its proponents must have strong pre-existing connections with the target beneficiaries and must be willing to grant open access to previous knowledge and work results. Somchai's comment shows how reputation and referrals are crucial to selecting a partner for a community project:

> *Sometimes we need to double-check with our close friends and close colleagues [...] 'We are going to work with this guy, we never worked with [him] before, but I have heard you worked with [him] a long time ago, so how was he?' [...] If [they reply] 'This is a good man, you can easily work with them for sure', I would feel more free, more comfortable to work." (Somchai)*

Dario and I were introduced by a common acquaintance – we will call him Gioele – whom we did not know well, but who had the lucky hunch that we might get along and, out of generosity, offered to connect us. Over time, the relationship between Dario and me became much stronger than the one between Dario and Gioele or between Gioele and myself, also thanks to the consistency of Dario's initial involvement in our relationship. Besides offering care and attention, Dario also started introducing me to people, although it took him a little longer to offer connections compared to care and support – probably because of the impact it could have on his reputation. During our first collaboration on a funded project, he introduced me to a partner organisation and asked me to design and facilitate a series of workshops. My only way to reciprocate the opportunity was to do my best at the job, hoping that this would reflect positively on his reputation as well as on mine. Dario's risk paid off: after our initial collaboration, the project partner proposed further work engagements, and the trust between Dario and me was strengthened.

In summary, offering connections as an act of reciprocity involves introducing people, welcoming them into one's network of relationships. Building a network allows the people involved to leverage its power by, for example, checking the reputation of potential partners while building one's own. Brokering a relationship also creates a subtle obligation to reciprocate the favour. However, to expand the network, members need to have the power, trust, and autonomy to do so.

## 7.5 Modelling desired behaviours

Modelling is a "behaviour which presents the actor as morally worthy and may also have the goal of eliciting imitation by others" (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985, p. 301). According to Bandura (1986), individuals can model attitudes, cognitions, or behaviours to those who observe them. Practitioners reported needing to "model the same behaviours we look for in partners" (Anne) to establish a system of reciprocity. This might mean showing trust, vulnerability, availability, patience, openness, fallibility, and welcoming feedback – all while acknowledging that the other party might not be ready or willing to reciprocate. Behaviours can be modelled in more or less explicit ways, as shown in the following paragraphs.

### 7.5.1 Explicit modelling of behaviours

Practitioners reported performing certain behaviours suggesting that these would be mimicked at a group level. For example, Leon and Alba reported disagreeing with each other on purpose, just to show what constructive and healthy disagreement looks like to their collaborators and their clients. They also draw the group's attention to positive behaviours like being honest or asking for consent.

> *"I try to check, and see what is the best thing, what is working. Model some behaviours, see what is being picked up, encourage some of that" (Alba)*

Alba highlighted that being brought in as the experts gave them the legitimacy to model behaviours; if someone not as reputable, connected, or powerful tried to explicitly model a desired behaviour, the reaction of the group might not be as accepting.

### 7.5.2 Propositional modelling of behaviours

A slightly more subtle strategy than explicitly pointing at a desired behaviour is to propose one and see if it is imitated and reciprocated. Carlo spoke about this type of modelling as

> *"creating courage, [...] the courage of really saying, 'Ok, look, we can do something together' [...] So now I trust you, and I find the courage [to put] it out there" (Carlo).*

Initiating a collaboration requires being vulnerable and making a leap of faith by manifesting the desire to collaborate without knowing whether it will be reciprocated – and hoping, but not being certain, that it will lead to a smooth and easy collaboration. This kind of courage is rooted in showing vulnerability:

> *"[Courage is] misinterpreted as this aggressive, masculine kind of toughness, whereas what it means is heartfulness. [...] It's this tenderness, it's this vulnerability, it's this willingness to feel things [...] I think it's such an amazing word, but so misunderstood. And so necessary for collaboration." (Leon)*

Propositional modelling is also used by Anne in the interactions with her Foundation's grantees. Proposing a collaboration is a delicate phase where roles and contributions need to be carefully negotiated (see § 8.4). Modelling fallibility and welcoming feedback are not only ways to encourage honesty and openness in project partners, but also a way to ask for permission to make mistakes. While Anne's

Foundation is known for their relational approach to funding and their values are clearly stated in their communication, it is important that they "walk the walk" (Anne) by proposing certain desired behaviours to prospective project partners.

### 7.5.3 Implicit modelling of behaviours

Behaviours can also be modelled without advertising them as positive or expected. Practitioners' reports suggest that this more subtle strategy might be more fitting for situations where relationships need to be repaired or gradually built in delicate situations, such as working with disenfranchised communities. Trust, for example, can be modelled implicitly in such situations. Generously giving trust ignites the process of trust building which leads to mutual trust (see § 8.2). Thomas eloquently describes modelling trust as an act of open reciprocity; he reported that, in some instances, he suspected that some people he was working with (such as contractors hired in the local community) were not entirely honest, but he chose to trust them anyway:

> *"[I]f you choose to be the one to trust, to take on the lead to trust certain people, they will trust you in return. I think there's a beauty of humanity that if you take the first step, I'm sure the other side, they will take some steps, maybe slower, but they will take the steps eventually. [...] I always see the return. It may not come directly from the party who has benefited from your program, but it will come back in some other time." (Thomas)*

In a system of generalised, open reciprocity, behaviours are modelled in the effort to establish a permanent reciprocation, but with the knowledge that they might have to be picked up by several members before they are adopted by a whole group or a community – and this process can take a long time. Lucy comments that, in situations where local government has repeatedly let down communities, the modelled behaviour might be to patiently and consistently show up, interrupting previous patterns of behaviour where the local government abandoned community projects that were not leading to the expected results. Consistency, over the years, is reciprocated with availability, commitment, and trust.

Explicit, propositional, and implicit modelling of behaviours are not mutually exclusive; practitioners could adopt a strategic approach and choose one type of modelling or the other depending on contextual factors. Observing them through the lens of *Intimacy or Integrity* (Kasulis, 2002), it is possible to draw some interesting parallels and dig deeper into the meaning of each type of modelling. Explicit modelling of behaviour can be associated with integrity's interest for external principles. When a behaviour is modelled explicitly, observers are invited to infer a concept of, for example, what 'good disagreement' looks like. External, recognisable characteristics of a certain positive behaviour are publicly noted and praised, in the hope that they are adopted. Implicit modelling of behaviour, on the other hand, relies on intimation and responsiveness. In Kasulis's words:

> *"In an intimate context people feel free to say anything […] Paradoxically, […] the more profound the interpersonal intimacy, the more that can be left unsaid. […] [T]he intimate bond depends on both parties' continued consent and commitment. […] The time and effort invested in the relationship [are] rewarded with the positive benefits of intimation […] Whenever the trust grounding intimacy erodes, however, the intimations can become vicious and stinging."* (Kasulis, 2002, p. 28-29).

Modelling a desired behaviour in an intimacy orientation means to assume a certain level of intimacy between the people involved and, for example, to intimate trust, suggesting the desire to be part of an 'inner circle' whose members adopt certain behaviours. Betraying the inner circle, while not necessarily publicly sanctioned, has emotional and relational consequences (see § 7.6.2). Propositional modelling of trust seems to sit between the more intimacy-oriented and the more integrity-oriented approach: while practitioners do not make a mystery of the principles and values driving their work, they also make intimate, subtle invitations to adopt a certain behaviour by taking the risk of displaying it first, without explicitly soliciting reciprocation.

Practitioners' comments on modelling desired behaviours reflect my experience at the Community Centre. Since discussions at the Community Centre tended to become heated, I explicitly introduced a 'check-in' round at the beginning of each meeting I facilitated: each participant, in turn, told the rest of the group how they were feeling coming into the meeting. I had an excellent experience with check-in rounds in the Practice Group, where the technique had been explicitly modelled to us during the training we took together. In the Practice Group, checking in had become a ritual: each of us arrived in our shared space carrying feelings, thoughts and sensations and placed them in plain sight for the group to observe or simply be aware of. Nothing was 'left at the door' (see § 7.3.1); everything was ritually acknowledged. Check-in rounds required some vulnerability, but a willingness to be vulnerable freed up the space between us and allowed us to weave relationships.

In the Community Centre, my proposal to check-in was regarded with suspicion and sometimes outright dismissed. Yet, in the meetings where they were implemented, check-ins did establish a sense of calm and allowed us to share our level of energy and our emotional state before discussing the agenda; the debate flowed more easily afterwards. I continued to request them and model the behaviour by checking in first. While some members (including Greta) played along, I had to acknowledge that it might take years of frequenting the Community Centre before the kind of behaviours I wanted to see and experience would start to show not only in dyadic interactions, but as part of the organisation's culture. In other words, I would have to fully belong to the organisation – to be part of the 'inner circle' – if I wanted a chance to change its established behaviours. This would mean sharing the joys and pains of relating with other members and accepting the risks of open reciprocity.

## 7.6 The risks of open reciprocity

The analysis has identified different acts of open reciprocity as ways to build a relationship in a process of designing social innovation. The acts are not entirely selfless: practitioners mentioned different motivations to enter a relationship and some openly shared having a self-interest in relationships, as well as a genuine interest in others. All their generous acts aimed at building relationships, however, expose them to different kinds of risk.

### 7.6.1 Losing time or money

Carlo expressed frustration at the "years of maintenance" of relationships that do not lead to any "concrete output or outcome", while Lamai and Rose (§ 7.3) mentioned the risk that the generosity would be taken advantage of, rather than recognised or reciprocated:

> *"I think they have sharing credit with me [...] [S]ometimes, they feel like they need to say that this is their work, and sometimes they forget to mention that it's me who helped them. Like maybe doing 90% of the work. So, it's been a little bit hard. But I don't think it's intentional" (Lamai)*

### 7.6.2 Risk of harming others or being harmed

Practitioners reported taking emotional risks to build relationships. Anne, for example, mentioned offering trust and support to her organisation's partners, but if that trust were to be betrayed, "it would be a viscerally personal issue for the team" (Anne). Other times, practitioners suspected they lacked preparation to offer the type of emotional care that was needed, worried about potentially crossing boundaries in difficult situations, or expressed a need to set clear limits to the amount of care and support they are able to provide.

### 7.6.3 Establishing undesired patterns of behaviour

Modelling a behaviour that would normally be considered a positive contribution can backfire, becoming an undesirable pattern. One practitioner complained about the behaviour of the founder of an organisation, who refused to accept payment for his work: this form of generosity was picked up by other members of the organisation, putting a strain on those who were not able to work for free. "Even though it's been years [...] of trying to course correct, [this behaviour] is still somehow in the DNA, [it] got into the [...] collective, and it's really hard to get rid of it", he commented. This is a fitting example of how a behaviour intended to encourage mutual aid can slip into inequality (Graeber, 2001): if working for free is established as a virtuous behaviour, but not everyone has the capacity to do so, it inadvertently exacerbates a power inequality between those who have more money and those who do not. This is particularly problematic in the context of the organisation described by the practitioner, which consciously tries to dismantle hierarchy.

### 7.6.4 Generosity being misunderstood

Sometimes in the Community Centre volunteers had a hard time navigating the ambiguity between a 'selfless' interest in the development of the Community Centre's cultural programme, and a personal interest in specific initiatives or events. In one instance, a Committee member organised an art exhibition and took care of designing, fabricating, and assembling the setup with the artist. He then donated the exhibition structures to the Community Centre, but a Board member accused him of having done so in the attempt to skew the Community Centre towards organising more exhibitions – a decision which the Board had not yet approved. Even offering material resources to the Community Centre, which Greta considered easier compared to the difficulties she experienced in navigating the ambiguities of care (see § 7.3), can be misunderstood (or can be intended as) a way to flaunt or challenge power. As described in § 7.3, care and attention can also be regarded as insincere or self-interested, leading to distrust. The ambiguity of generosity needs to be carefully navigated.

### 7.6.5 Becoming 'entangled' in relationships

Some practitioners mentioned becoming 'entangled' in relationships. Developing a relationship with someone might entail having to maintain it beyond the end of a project; brokering a relationship between two people could result in being held accountable in the long term for the behaviour of the people who were introduced:

> *"You do remain the link. You do remain the face. You do remain that connection [...] If something goes wrong [...] I'm going to be the one who [...] [gets] at least part of the blame for making a connection that was not successful. I think that the challenge there is: can it be a clear cut? [W]e know when a relationship starts. Do we know when a relationship ends in the sense that you want it to end because otherwise, you'd be forever responsible for it? [...] It's one of the things that I found myself most entangled with, and I still don't have a solution" (Carlo)*

> *"I need to maintain the relationship [...] If they text me or they Facebook me 'Can you come to join this event?', even though sometimes I feel so sick that I need to take a rest, I don't want to go, but sometimes I need, I need to go. I need to keep relation with them anyhow [...] I cannot upset them in any case" (Somchai)*

With reference to the "trust by proxy" phenomenon described by Nora in the Practice Group (§ 7.4), she shared that being the intermediary of trust felt risky:

*"[I]f I'm not in the room, do these people still trust one another? [...] I constantly feel responsible for [...] maintaining the trust that has been established by proxy through me, [...] finding funding for us because I started this thing and I feel an obligation to myself, partly, to make it happen, but also to everyone else who has so generously offered resources, connections" (Nora)*

Nora's comment is a good example of entanglement in relationships brought not only by being the broker of multiple relationships, but also by participating in a system of reciprocity where people involved offer resources and connections.

As described in § 7.4, the Practice Group was proposed by Sophie, who took the initiative to ask other participants in the same online training programme if anyone wanted to continue meeting. The meetings were hosted by Sophie's Zoom account; our collaborative notes were stored in her cloud drive; until we decided that we would take turns to facilitate our meetings, she facilitated them, and she often maintained a facilitative attitude even when the group met more loosely and did not select a facilitator. For example, she would prompt other group members with check-in and check-out questions; she proposed topics for discussion; she kept notes even when other members were not contributing. Sophie was also the most consistent with her participation in our Practice Group meetings, to the point that I noticed that her occasional absence gave our meetings a different spirit. "Will the group be tied to Sophie's presence forever? Will it dissolve if she announces she no longer wishes to participate?" I wrote in my diary. "I am grateful to Sophie for setting up the group and for hosting it so often. I am not sure how to share this responsibility with her, however, without feeling that I am somehow challenging her".

These experiences show that vacating the role of the founder as the driver of an initiative can be challenging. Acts of generosity create expectations; they set a tone; they reinforce or challenge power dynamics. It might not be easy to find ways to reciprocate, as generosity creates ambiguity, and it might not be easy to leave the relationship, as this very ambiguity keeps us tied to one another in a continuous, non-transactional exchange of generous acts. The point is not to seek the maximum advantage or 'return on investment' in relationships: what is being distributed or gifted (time, knowledge, connections, emotional support, even money in some of the examples described) is not considered in terms of its intrinsic value, but in how it can alter or reorganise the relations between the parties involved in the exchange. Within a system of open reciprocity, most of what is offered is not quantifiable; while it does create the feeling that one ought to return the favours received *somehow*, it would be hard to do so with precision and thus close out the relationship. Instead, the parties involved in the system find themselves sharing resources and connections. This can sometimes create difficulties, as practitioners reported not having time or energy to cultivate all relationships; but it keeps open the possibility of further collaboration and allows to maintain a network, which was described by most practitioners as essential to their work in DSI initiatives.

## 7.7 Summary of Chapter 7

This chapter has examined building a system of reciprocity as the first attribute of relationality in designing social innovation. It has considered ‘generalised’ or ‘open’ reciprocity as those acts of generosity that are performed hoping, but not expecting, a direct, material return and generating a diffuse, but rather ambiguous, sense of counter-obligation. Initiating a system of reciprocity and navigating its ambiguities poses some risks to the parties involved in the relationship but proves mostly beneficial as it opens to collaboration. Table 7.1 below summarises the different types of offering made to establish a system of reciprocity, what they might look like in practice, and the risks and difficulties associated with them.

Having described how relationships are initiated and nurtured through reciprocity acts, Chapter 8 now focuses on how relationships can be developed and maintained, introducing the theme “Establishing and maintaining mutuality”.

*Table 7.1 Types of offerings in a system of reciprocity*

| **Type of offering** | **Actions performed** | **Associated risks and difficulties** |
|---|---|---|
| Offering resources | Offering time, money, learning opportunities | Being taken advantage of; being misunderstood; being rejected; losing time and/or money |
| Offering care | Listening, being present, holding space, offering emotional support | Being misunderstood; difficulties setting/respecting boundaries; balancing obligation and care |
| Offering connections | Brokering relationships, expanding a network, giving referrals, building others' and one's own reputation | Being held accountable for the behaviour of people introduced; reputational damage; becoming "entangled" in relationships |
| Modelling desired behaviours | Taking the lead in displaying certain desired behaviours (e.g., trust, vulnerability, availability, patience, fallibility, welcoming feedback) | Being betrayed or hurt, establishing undesirable patterns |

# Chapter 8. Establishing and maintaining mutuality

This chapter presents the second theme developed in the Framework for Relational Literacy: ‘Establishing and maintaining mutuality’. Firstly, I offer a definition of ‘mutuality’ by drawing on relevant literature and on the metaphors offered by participants. Section 8.2 focuses on ‘mutual trust’ as a core feature of establishing and maintaining mutuality; it presents different models of trust and propose the accompanying concept of ‘psychological safety’ as a nuance of trust dynamics in DSI. In section 8.3, I introduce ‘mutual respect’ and ‘mutual learning’ and briefly discuss them in Indigenous cultural practices. Section 8.4 deals with role-taking, mutual expectations, and power dynamics. Finally, section 8.5 presents explicit and implicit approaches to building and maintaining mutuality.

## 8.1 Definition and contextualisation

The term ‘mutual’ has multiple definitions, including (Merriam-Webster, 2021):

A. directed by each toward the other;
B. having the same feelings one for the other;
C. shared in common;
D. characterised by intimacy.

The concept is discussed in many fields including clinical psychology, organisational psychology, and nursing science. What is common to definitions across different fields is the view of mutuality as a connection with or understanding of another that facilitates a dynamic process of exchange (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Henson, 1997; Jordan et al., 2004). Mutuality has been discussed in association with respect (Buber, 1923; Jordan et al., 2004); openness to change, responsiveness, empathy and learning (Jordan, Walker & Hartling, 2004); care and justice (Ehringer, 1991; in Henson, 1997); roles, obligations and psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1998; Shore et al., 2004), and more; specific attributes of mutuality, and their definitions, are discussed in the relevant paragraphs in this chapter.

For the purpose of this research, mutuality is defined as the extent of agreement between the dyadic parties about the nature of their relationship and its specific terms (Shore et al., 2004), and implies a 'respective' relationship in which certain actions are performed by two people with respect to one another (Graumann, 1995). In this context, it is not to be considered a fixed state or an 'end goal' of the relationship, but rather as a process; it is also not entirely controllable by the parties involved, although it can be navigated.

### 8.1.1 Using metaphors to define mutuality

This research identified mutuality as an important concept that DSI practitioners consistently described in their work. When reviewing the Framework with practitioners and colleagues, I used the metaphor of a dance to explain the fluid character of mutuality and the role of reciprocity in initiating it; below is a summary of the description I gave during our dialogue:

> *"Mutuality is a little like dancing. When you want to dance with someone, you first have to take the risk of asking them – and so it might be that they say no, or it might be that they start dancing with you. So, you take a step to the right, I take a step to the left. 'Oh, we're too far apart now'. I take a step forward, I step on your toe, 'Whoops, sorry'. It's all a sort of strange dance, and who is leading it? Do you trust me to lead? Can I trust you?"*

This metaphor echoed Anne's definition of negotiating roles between funders and grantees as a "strange dance"; practitioners also proposed other metaphors. Rose reported she uses the image of "dating before getting married" when coaching social entrepreneurs about building professional relationships, mentioning the need to build trust, to show genuine interest, to be thankful of the time spent with potential partners. Leon framed the process of building a relationship as a mutual discovery:

> *[E]very relationship has a context that has its own, like you say, specific terms [...] In a way, you don't choose what they are, you just get to discover them. You go through this process of revealing [...] needs and desires and offers and requests. And you show those to each other, and then you find out where they match [...] Your agency doesn't have much to do with it. All you have is more or less authenticity in the process of disclosure, and you manage how much disclosure". (Leon)*

When discussing the initial interactions with his collaborators, including myself, Dario often used the word "courtship". The word suggests a subtle but systematic process of pursuit where the desire to impress the other person is balanced with a progressive readiness to show one's true self. Dario and I invited each other to our organisations' events (and we made sure we were going); we promptly replied to each other's emails and texts; we became progressively invested in each other's projects, until our relationship was mature enough to start a longer collaboration. During our work together, we developed what he referred to as a "professional friendship": we talked about work matters, sometimes confidential, and discussed personal matters such as our families and friends. Each stage of our relationship was subtly negotiated: did he trust me enough for me to make a decision on the project without running it by him first? Could he openly admit if he made a mistake? Would I be overstepping the boundaries of my role, were I to ask him about his family? With every interaction, we reinforced our mutual understanding about these and other matters.

In summary, 'Establishing and maintaining mutuality' is the respective effort of both parties involved in the relationship to build and keep a shared understanding of what the relationship entails. It evokes feelings of intimacy, gradual disclosure, and closeness. Among the potentially endless and contextual elements of mutuality, I could identify some recurrent patterns: in the practitioners' experience (and in my own), mutuality is underpinned and enacted by and through core features of mutual trust and psychological safety; role-taking and mutual expectations; mutual respect and mutual learning. As shown in the following paragraphs, all these elements intersect with power distribution and power dynamics.

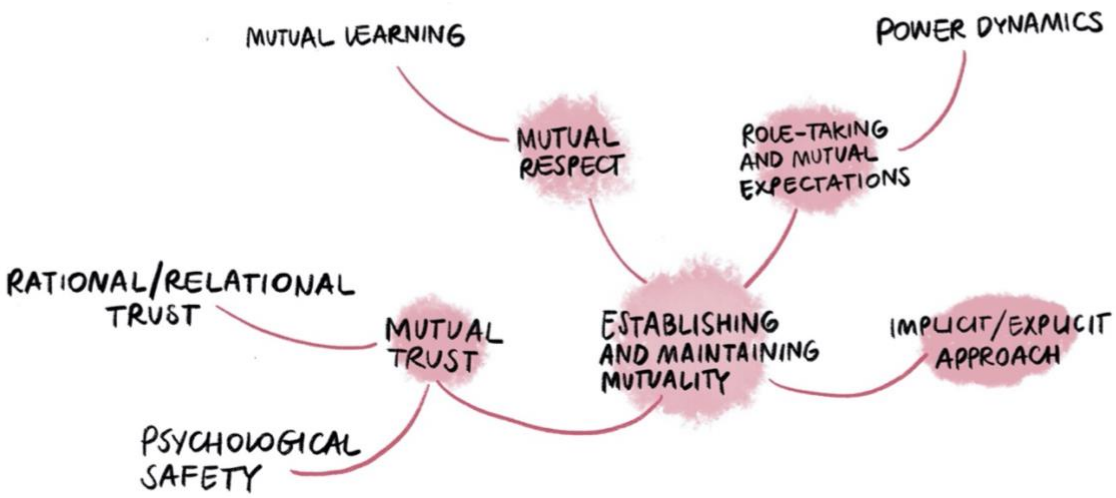


*Figure 8.1 Diagram of the theme 'Establishing and maintaining mutuality' with its subthemes*

## 8.2 Mutual trust

A unique, undisputed definition of trust remains elusive (Creed et al., 1996; Kramer, 1999); however, most definitions include mentions of a perceived risk and vulnerability, as well as an element of expectation or exchange. Robinson (1996, p. 576) defines trust as a "one's expectations, assumptions, or beliefs about the likelihood that another's future actions will be beneficial, favourable, or at least not detrimental to one's interests". Mayer et al. (1995, p. 724) define trust as "the willingness to take risks" and "be vulnerable to the actions of another party, based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party" (1995, p. 712). Supporting the findings of previous research on trust in collaborative design practice (Bratteteig et al., 2012; Clarke et al., 2019; Pirinen, 2016; Warwick, 2017), trust among members of the same organisation and among project partners at all levels, from government to community, is considered essential. In the practitioners' words, trust is "the core of everything we do" (Anne) and "[t]here should be a certain amount of trust before we even start the work" (Thomas). While trust building as described by practitioners relies on modelling behaviours and building reciprocity (see § 7.5), they stressed the mutuality of trust in that they felt it “works both ways” (Anne): it must be mutual to enable the construction of equal partnerships.

### 8.2.1 Rational and relational models of trust

Trust is guided by patterns of decision making, which have been described in different ways by various authors. Lewicki and Bunker (1996) identify calculus-based trust (an economic calculation of the benefits of being trustworthy against the costs of violating trust); knowledge-based trust, which depends on whether the other’s behaviour is anticipatable; and identification-based trust, which exists because both parties understand and protect the interests of the other.

Kramer (1999) considers conceptualisations of trust as a choice with either a rational or a relational model. A rational model sees trust as a calculation: people choose to trust when, after a conscious calculation of advantages, it appears rational to do so. Conversely, a relational model sees trust as a social orientation toward other people and society as a whole (Kramer 1999, p. 574). Rather than being mutually exclusive, the two models reinforce context-specificity as an attribute of trust: depending on context, instrumentality or social considerations might be foregrounded in trust judgements and decisions (Hardin, 1990; in Kramer, 1999).

Kasulis (2002, p. 4) proposes a similar differentiation between two types of trust: intellectual and affective. Intellectual trust is more typical of the integrity orientation: the person to be trusted embodies the values of objective data, thus trusting them is the result of a logical decision. Affective trust is based on intimacy and intuition; it is the result of knowing that the other person will be affectively present and supportive.

Practitioners described trusting with both a rational (intellectual, calculus-based) and a relational (affective, identification-based) model. For example, Carlo described aiming for a win-win situation that takes into account material and relational benefits:

> *“It's a cliché, but relationships have to be a win-win situation, right? At the end of the day, we are an economic being, and therefore, there must be something I'm getting out of this relationship. .. Even if it's just [...] the feeling that ‘Oh, yeah. At least that person is happier’, right? If the relationship doesn't really give you anything, there's very little chance of success.” (Carlo)*

When setting up a research project, Somchai makes sure that the communities involved know they will get an economic benefit alongside the research outcome:

> *"They have something in exchange for sure. It's not just about promising an outcome, but in a practical way saying, 'I have some budget for this [...] and you can get some money back too', but [it's] not just you answer[ing] my questions from the interview script." (Somchai)*

Reassuring all partners that the project will bring mutual benefits can be identified as a way to build trust in a rational model. Conversely, a relational model of trust building might rely more on open reciprocity and modelling trust (see § 7.5), as actions demonstrating trust –as well as distrust– tend to induce similar behaviours (Kadefors, 2004).

### 8.2.2 Psychological safety

Trust is also fundamental in that it enables the creation of a climate of psychological safety in organisations. Edmonson (2004) conceptualises psychological safety as an interpersonal belief that is distinct and complementary to trust: while trust is a property of the dyad, psychological safety is an emergent property of groups. A trustor gives the trustee the benefit of the doubt, letting them make decisions and perform actions without monitoring *them*; psychological safety leads individuals to not monitor their *own* actions to protect themselves from negative reactions of the group. Moreover, in psychologically unsafe environments, individuals don't take risks because they fear short term consequences (such as being publicly shamed); in environments that lack trust, individuals fear long-term negative consequences (Edmonson, 2004). The absence of psychological safety hinders mutuality; in the words of Miller et al. (2004, p. 79), "I can anticipate threats and thus armour myself *against* connection and mutuality [...] [R]elationships across stratification are rife with living and active images that can undermine even the most deeply felt yearnings for connection".

Psychological safety is more easily observable by identifying its consequences in interpersonal and intergroup relationships. West and Anderson (Anderson & West, 1998; West, 1990; West & Anderson, 1996) have proposed the concept of "participative safety" as a precondition to innovation and innovative behaviour in teamwork: for creativity to flourish in teams, all members must feel comfortable expressing opinions (participating in decision making) and giving and receiving feedback without suffering negative social consequences (intragroup safety). The following explanation given by practitioners Leon and Alba illustrates participative safety and its relationship to innovation:

> *Leon: If I'm secure in my bond with you, then I feel no hesitancy to tell you what's going on. [...] I can be real. In a team context where you have a shared objective, if the relationships are good, you can just say, 'I don't think the strategy is right. I have no confidence in the direction that we're taking, how about we try a different thing?'. Whereas if you don't have those secure relationships, then most people are not going to say that. [...] To access the full capacity of the collective intelligence, people have to feel confident that they're allowed to share [...] their piece of the collective wisdom. There's been lots of times [...] especially within [organisation] where we took really significant changes of direction in a very short space of time because-*
> *Alba: We were honest.*
> *Leon: People are honest.*

Another example of psychological safety was brought by Anne. Her organisation funds social innovation projects and is therefore in the power-heavy position to pull funding from its grantees. However, her approach is to establish and maintain a sense of psychological safety where grantees can freely talk about mistakes and difficulties:

> *"[R]unning a non-profit honestly, or an intervention, [is] really tough and it can be really lonely. [...] [M]y role, actually, is often to be there as a support and as a partner and to say, look, as long as we have confidence in the mindset and the approach of you and your team [...] we expect there to be change. We expect there to be iteration. We are backing you 110%. It's not that if we find out that you hired someone and then found out they weren't any good, that we will then [...] retract the money". (Anne)*

Anne is not just reassuring grantees that they are trusted and that there will not be negative consequences to their struggles. Her organisation aims to be open about mistakes and learning, and actively seeks feedback from grantees (who, in fact, are described as "partners") in any way that makes them comfortable:

> *"[We are] very deliberate and intentional about seeking input from our partners. Both feedback on us and what we're doing, and it can be*

> *anonymised or face to face, but also getting their ideas as new strands of work emerge. [...] [W]e would never take on a new partner without input from existing partners." (Anne)*

Mutual trust and a sense of psychological safety allow all those involved in the relationship to seek help, welcome and offer feedback, and openly admit mistakes – even when their power position would discourage them from doing so. This open exchange of ideas can increase the organisations' capacity to innovate, reduce the resistance to change, and surface weaknesses and errors earlier in the process (West, 1990).

The importance of trust and psychological safety is evident if we consider the episode described in § 7.6.4, when a Committee member who donated some exhibition structures to the Community Centre was accused of pushing his own agenda by a Board member. In our conversations, he spoke about perceiving a general lack of trust in the Committee. In the perspective of Committee members, a rational model of trust did not apply to the Committee: since its purpose was still being defined, calculating rational advantages to trust would have made little sense. The type of trust Committee members asked for, in this phase, was more of the relational kind: to receive full permission and support by the Board to experiment, make mistakes and innovate. From the perspective of Board members, however, the purpose of the Committee had already been defined by the Board: trust in the Committee was rationally measured against its success in producing a calendar of events. This misunderstanding on the purpose and scope of the Committee intersected with complex power dynamics and contributed to a lack of trust and psychological safety in the Community Centre. Creating a climate of trust and psychological safety would have required a considerable investment by the Board, such as initially giving the Committee resources and support, and being willing to negotiate power and responsibility in the long run. My discomfort at the idea of criticising the Board (see § 4.3.2), Greta's reticence about showing vulnerability as a Board member (see § 7.3.1), and Community Centre's members resistance to expressing their emotional state during check-ins (§ 7.5) could also be understood as responses to a lack of psychological safety.

Examples brought by practitioners and my experience in the Community Centre show that it is easier to build trust and psychological safety if efforts to do so are initially made by those who have more power through acts of open reciprocity. Moreover, maintaining mutual trust and psychological safety requires a readiness to navigate power shifts. Psychological safety also intersects with behaviours related to learning and improvement (Edmonson, 2004), which are discussed in the following paragraph.

## 8.3 Mutual respect and mutual learning

Mutual learning was presented by practitioners as one way to encourage the levelling of power and work towards achieving and maintaining equal partnerships. It begins with establishing mutual respect by modelling respectful behaviour (see § 7.5) and cultivating psychological safety (see § 8.2.2).

The concept of mutual learning as a way to equalise power relationships is often discussed as a motivation and an outcome of participatory design (Kensing & Greenbaum, 2012, p. 21). In their work on participatory design and infrastructuring, Bødker et al. (2017) build on the work of Engeström (2013) to describe "knotworks", fluid assemblies of heterogeneous participants working in "symbiotic agreement" through mutually beneficial or explorative partnerships. Knotworks, together with more stable "networks" of relationships, form the infrastructure of a project; relational agency, which is exerted by all stakeholders and dispersed among people and organisations, involves engaging with this infrastructure at various levels of authority, recognizing and respecting the resources and understandings that other people carry. These resources and understandings can then be exchanged in a mutually beneficial, mutually respectful learning process.

One example illustrating mutual respect and mutual learning as fundamental aspects of infrastructuring is brought by Gloria, whose organisation works in capacity building and inclusive development in a South-East Asian country. Gloria explains her work is mostly related to developing intangible elements, such as relationships and networks, into stable, durable infrastructures of collaboration. She describes the process of initiating and sustaining a project within a community: it begins by seeking the "blessing or permission of the community leader", after which researchers and designers spend a period immersing themselves in the community. Gloria's organisation provides the resources and the platform enabling regular interactions and mutual learning between "target beneficiaries" and innovation actors:

> *"[I]t's not just downloading information or, for example, the research training or capacitating them, but it's actually a two-way capability development team. [...] [O]ur researchers also treat it as a learning opportunity for them as well because these communities are actually the knowledge bearers [...]. They know the community better than anyone". (Gloria)*

Asking for permission and valuing the competences and capabilities of project partners are indicators of respect and set the conditions for mutual learning to occur. Learnings from the community are incorporated in subsequent iterations of the design and prototype; the structure of the whole project changes depending on inputs from the community, in a process that Gloria calls "backward integration". Building trust and enabling mutual learning also enhances the likelihood of further collaboration:

> *"[O]nce the community commits to a project, it challenges you to say, 'Okay, so I need to really follow through this project, and not just go there, and after the project just leave them, as is'. That encouraged follow-up initiatives with the communities". (Gloria)*

### 8.3.1 Mutual respect and learning in Indigenous cultural practices

Two practitioners[3] who have experience of working alongside Indigenous communities in Aotearoa New Zealand offer a compelling example of how equal partnerships can be created and maintained by following Indigenous cultural protocols that emphasise mutual respect and mutual learning. The process begins by finding common ground, building trust, and exploring mutual consent to respectful collaboration:

[3] The two practitioners working with Indigenous communities identify as Pākehā, i.e., non-Māori New Zealanders primarily of European descent.

*“The first thing you have to do within Maori culture is* whakawhanaungatanga[4]*, you have to get to know who's in the room [...] you don't start the work until you've established who you are, where you come from and what your shared values are around”. (Lucy)*

*“A* wānanga[5] *might look like a workshop, but it will be on* marae[6]*, so it would be on a cultural site and you will follow in practice cultural protocols. So you have to be welcomed onto the site”. (Lucy)*

*“[It was] a whole ceremony, which took hours, of being invited, like enthusiastically and genuinely invited onto the land and given permission, given a sense of ‘We claim authority on this land, and we have some values and some ways of being that are crucial. And if you’re willing to adhere to those ways of being, then you can consider yourself as entitled as any other local’”. (Leon)*

After establishing mutual consent, clarifying the relationship, and aligning values, the design process continues with a pattern of mutual learning. The Maori term *ako* encapsulates the mutuality of the learning process and the levelling of power:

*“[T]he design process from Maori lens is very much about* ako. Ako *means to teach and to learn at the same time. So, it’s both”. (Lucy)*

Indigenous perspectives on participatory design highlight the importance of “preserv[ing] difference, opposition and division in the knowledge that we all inhabit a living mutualism” (Sheehan, 2011, p. 69). Indigenous knowledge applied to design foregrounds deep situational awareness, respect, and care; through an openness to mutual learning, collective well-being can be pursued even from a plurality of positions. As one practitioner described it, it is about:

*“[F]ocusing on the quality of the present moment and the lived experience of the subject or individuals that are in the space and like, how are they*

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[4] *Whakawhanaungatanga* is the “process of establishing relationships, relating well to others” (maoridictionary.co.nz)

[5] *Wānanga* is a “seminar, conference, forum, educational seminar, gathering” (maoridictionary.co.nz)

[6] *Marae* is a “courtyard - the open area in front of the *wharenui* (meeting house), where formal greetings and discussions take place” (maoridictionary.co.nz)

> *doing? What needs do they have? Can I adjust my posture in a way that meets their needs more effectively?" (Leon)*

Far from the heteronomy of universal, standardised design practice, Indigenous perspectives propose autonomy as a general principle, as it brings forth diverse and distinct responses organised in complex, reflexive, adaptive systems (Sheehan, 2011). Autonomy is grounded in relational cultural practices and enables communities to change the norms from within, or "change traditions traditionally" (Escobar, 2017, p. 172). The difficulties of Western conceptualisations of PD to fully adopt a relational paradigm (exemplified by the tendency to consider relationality as a skill designers bring to the project, rather than as a way of being) are, as notes one practitioner, "completely resolved within an Indigenous worldview, because those things [are] already settled" (Lucy). Leon explicitly noted that this approach is key to studies focused on relationships in DSI: "you've got a research question, and I think the answer is Indigenous approaches to design".

## 8.4 Role-taking and mutual expectations

References to mutuality also highlighted anticipated obligations associated with role-taking and expectations of what each party would bring to the relationship. Showing consistency in fulfilling obligations and conforming to the other party's expectations was reported to increase trust: "There has to be, to a certain extent, predictability, which means you don't change all the time" (Thomas). However, practitioners discussed the need to balance and integrate different roles – and therefore different obligations and expectations – including being a trusted advisor, a facilitator of conversations and co-design activities, a critical friend and "thought partner" (Anne), a connector with other people, with resources or knowledge, and a host of events. These informal roles were described as overlapping with more consistent, formal ones such as funder, design consultant, professor, trainer, or representative of local government.

While deep, trusting relationships can generate and sustain projects, failing to balance different roles can generate contrasting expectations or even conflict:

> *"They invite me to join [a community event]. I cannot refuse that I am from uni[versity], I'm pretty well known in [country]. But I try to be my own individual representing my own [self]. I'm not trying to be like, "Okay, I'm the lecturer and I'm knowledgeable about this and I want these people to do this and that". (Somchai)*

> *"[A]t the beginning of the project, even though I try so hard to be friendly with everyone, to be close, connect to the one I think would be a good key informant for me, I need to be aware that maybe I need to keep some distance, because I come from outside anyway. If there are conflicts in the community and it seems that I am pro this guy, maybe I will not get any help from them. So that's why it's so hard for me to balance my roles in the communities". (Somchai)*

### 8.4.1 Role-taking and power dynamics in context

Roles taken are also influenced by power dynamics where the ability of one party to have power over the other and exert some control over its behaviour, including imposing obligations, occurs (Fasli, 2006). Practitioners have reported experiencing power imbalances, particularly in teacher-learner or funder-grantee relationships or in interactions with members of disenfranchised communities:

> *"It takes time [...] to get that elephant in the room out of the way and to kind of work on that power dynamic between the one who has the money and the one who is asking for the money". (Anne)*

Assuming egalitarian structures among participants can conceal relevant factors such as hidden agendas or social hierarchies; providing tools for participation without questioning the quality and nature of engagement can reproduce and exacerbate imbalanced power structures (Pierri, 2016). However, the approach to power dynamics changes depending on contexts and cultures. For example, in Thailand social hierarchy is firmly rooted in the society; status differentiation varies from context to context, and Thais generally do not perceive it as negative (see Tjahja & Yee, 2017 for an account of social hierarchy and DSI in Thailand). One practitioner from Thailand commented:

> *"[I]n Thailand, because it's very relationship based, when someone disagrees, they wouldn't say it in the meeting [...] you need to respect the elders. [...] [Y]ou can't really express how you feel [...] We have certain power structures, so you need to respect people who have higher education, you know, older, richer and things like that". (Lamai)*

Another practitioner, who is originally from Europe and works in Cambodia, commented that, in his experience, experts were rarely challenged; he noted a difference from the dominant approach in Western countries, where questioning authority is more common and hierarchy is perceived as detrimental to participation:

> *"[P]eople sometimes see you as this person who knows some stuff and then they kind of more or less automatically trust you [...] people just listen to you and don't question what you tell them [...] This changes the dynamics of some relationships." (Victor)*

Practitioners' accounts show that being aware of power structures and dynamics, as well as of the cultural and organisational context they play out in, is essential to establishing mutuality in DSI. This was certainly true in all my contexts of practice, but is perhaps best explained here through an account of role-taking and mutual expectations in the *Building belonging in schools* project.

At the beginning of the project, Dario and I agreed that we would design the content of the workshops together and then pick five or six schools each where we would deliver the workshops separately. We would meet all the teachers at their respective schools at least once, so that he could introduce me to them.

After our first two meetings with the teachers, we had to change our plans. Besides the fact that students were too many for just one facilitator to handle, the 'invisible work' of coordination and care I described in § 4.2.5 required teachers and principals to trust me as much as they trusted Dario. However, they knew him better than me; because of the difference in age and experience between Dario and me, if some schools were to be managed by me exclusively, they might feel they were 'left to junior staff' while senior staff dealt with more important tasks. Moreover, during our first two, rather formal meetings with the teachers where we had to deliver some training, Dario did most of the talking, given that I was younger and less experienced than any teacher in the room. We therefore decided we would facilitate all the workshops together.

Compared to the meetings with teachers, the co-design workshops with children flowed with more ease for me. I did not have to maintain a serious tone to preserve my credibility with teachers as much as Dario; instead, I could freely do whatever was needed to engage the students in the planned activities. This time, being the younger adult in the room was an advantage, as I was perceived by children to be more similar to an older sister than to a teacher or a parent; so, I jumped around, made funny faces, and came up with ways to encourage turn-taking and quiet time for reflection without correcting or sanctioning the students.

In one of our conversations, Dario lamented he would have liked children to trust him more, and question him less; I had the same remark about teachers, though some of them expressed fascination towards our approach. We commented there was a partial overlap between our work and that of teachers, which sometimes led us and them to become quite protective of our respective roles.

At the start of year two of the project, Dario sent a personalised email to all teachers specifying that, from that moment on, our approach would be tailored to each school and that I would call them soon to catch up. At this point, teachers already knew me and trusted both Dario and me enough to accept this handover. We kept in touch, and what teachers expected of me shifted: being their most frequent contact, I was expected to have the same control over the whole project (including other partners' activities) that Dario had. I also became a confidante for some teachers, who would sometimes voice work-related frustrations with me. Their disclosures would shed light on why projects were not progressing, and implicitly suggested ways that Dario and I could better support the schools to stay on track.

Our role changed again during the Covid-19 pandemic. In my diary, and in conversation with Dario, I noticed a need for certainty and anchorage, but also a renewed openness to dialogue, searching for solutions collectively, and proceeding by trial and error. Designing in such uncertainty involved giving up control over the project and authorized us to proceed without feeling too bound by decisions and agreements we had already made; at this stage, we focused on mutual care and caring for the project, to preserve it and adapt it to our new conditions. Sometimes, this meant contributing in unexpected ways: in one instance, I helped the school staff take measurements of a classroom and presented them with a fully designed library, with different choices of furniture and budget estimates. In conversation with Dario, I pedantically remarked I did not expect to work with this level of detail in each school – but as I voiced my concerns, I realised that, in the current conditions, my availability would be a form of care for the project and for the people involved in it. Dario and I agreed we would do whatever was necessary to make teachers comfortable at this time.

This experience shows that roles and expectations were fluid in *Building belonging in schools.* All participants had to adapt to the circumstances of the project and work on maintaining a mutual understanding of respective roles and responsibilities in the face of profound change. Respecting the knowledge each of us carried (Dario and me as 'expert facilitators'; teachers as the 'school experts'; students as the experts of their learning experience) allowed us to exchange information and distribute power depending on contingent needs. Our ability to mutually adapt and navigate change resulted in a climate of mutual trust and psychological safety.

## 8.5 Building mutuality explicitly and implicitly

Building mutuality can be approached in more or less explicit ways. Leon and Alba spoke about different practices they put in place to consciously build mutuality in groups – the same practices I experimented with in their training programme and then in the Practice Group. These involve putting the relationship at the centre of the conversation (the 'dating' metaphor persisted in Leon's account):

> *"[T]here is also collective self-awareness. Moving from being a subject of your relationship to treating the relationship as an object [...] The specific practice here is doing like a retrospective, and you say, 'How is this group going?' [...] 'Do you want to be my boyfriend?' you know, there are these kind of gestures that we make, that suddenly make the relationship visible and tangible, and we can change it" (Leon)*

When we reviewed the Framework for Relational Literacy together, Dario commented that, in collaborations between different organisations, he most often got a feeling there was "good chemistry" with someone, professionally speaking, when both parties were willing to explicitly negotiate the relationship:

> *"[T]here's good chemistry when you say, 'Look, this is what my organisation is like, these are the constraints I'm working with, this is how far I can get' – you declare it." (Dario)*

In Dario's account, not all relationships are so clear and explicit. In some cases, implicitness is the only way forward, because the relationship is not mature enough to lay things bare:

> *"T]here are things that are left unsaid. [S]ometimes you don't notice them, and it's fine. Sometimes you do notice them [...] and that's the hardest part, [...] when the magic isn't there. That's when, perhaps, one should pursue openness, sincerity, confrontation, contrast even… but there might not be the grounds for doing so." (Dario)*

Yet, mutuality between me and Dario was built mostly quietly. Even during our conversations, which Dario knew I was recording for research purposes, we did not examine our relationship in the manifest, objectified way that Leon suggested in his comment. We did not explicitly discuss constraints and interests either, although when I presented the Framework for Relational Literacy to Dario, he linked some themes and sub-themes to the conversations we had. In fact, Dario confessed that writing the *Building belonging in schools* proposal with our collaboration in mind was "a bit of a gamble": I was in Indonesia, and he did not know whether I would be in Italy when the project would start. During the project, we took different roles, we showed interest in each other's work, and we learned from each other without explicitly negotiating our relationship. In conversation, we progressively, reciprocally hinted at our interests and preferences, mutually adapting to one another.

Explicit and implicit ways of building mutuality can be observed through the lens of Kasulis's *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002, p. 130). Kasulis describes the implications of integrity and intimacy orientations for decision-making and coming to agreements. In an integrity paradigm, decision-making is more likely to rely on compromise (a verbally explicit contract). The two parties are clear about their needs and reciprocally balance priorities. Parties rationally trust (see § 8.2.1) that everyone involved in the negotiation will abide by its results. In an intimacy paradigm, consensus (an affectively sensed knowledge of respective positions) is more common: the two parties speak indirectly, trusting (relationally; see § 8.2.1) that the other will understand the intimations, so that both can converge to an agreement.

## 8.6 Summary of Chapter 8

This chapter has examined ‘establishing and maintaining mutuality’ as the second attribute of relationality in designing social innovation. It has defined mutuality as the extent of agreement between parties about what their relationship means and entails. Often compared to intimate interactions such as dancing, dating or courtship, mutuality is a fluid process that is fuelled by acts of reciprocity, gives them meaning, and further scaffolds the relationship by seeking agreement on various aspects: whether the parties trust each other; whether it is possible to exchange knowledge on respectful grounds; what the respective roles are and what they entail. Establishing and maintaining mutuality, as a collective sense-making process, can be made explicit through dialogue and negotiation; but it often remains implicit, and parties might even not be aware that it is taking place. They enact their respective roles showing considerable amounts of flexibility and adaptability as expectations, power and hierarchy continuously change depending on the context. Specific features and dynamics of mutuality are summarised in Table 8.1.

As parties in a relationship agree on and perform their respective roles, not only their relationship is transformed, but also their identity, which is the focus of the following chapter.

*Table 8.1 A synthesis of the main features of establishing and maintaining mutuality*

| Feature | Definition | Dynamics |
|---|---|---|
| Mutual trust | Vulnerability to the actions of others based on the expectation that their actions will be beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to one's interests. Individuals do not monitor or control **the others'** actions to protect themselves from them. | Trust can be based on rational calculations and on relational considerations, depending on context.<br>It relies on one party – usually the one who has more power – to model trust for the other.<br>The maintenance of trust relies on mutual benefits (material or relational) taking place over time. |
| Psychologica l safety | Vulnerability to the actions of others based on the expectation that their actions will be beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to one's interests. Individuals do not monitor **their own** actions to protect themselves from others. | Individuals take interpersonal risks, make mistakes, express opinions and offer feedback without suffering negative social consequences.<br>Psychological safety relies on one party – usually the one with more power – to model vulnerability for the other. |
| Mutual respect | Care and awareness in the way one identifies, explores and assesses meaning, stemming from an awareness that it is impossible to fully know the implication of one's actions. | Respect is a form of situated awareness that can lead to, for example, seeking permission to community leaders before commencing a project, seeking consent for specific interactions, or engaging in specific cultural practices when the context requires so. Respect implies an acknowledgement of the other party's power, authority and autonomy. |

| Feature | Definition | Dynamics |
|---|---|---|
| Mutual learning | A mutually beneficial, mutually respectful exchange of knowledge and understanding. | Mutual learning preserves difference and opposition, but contributes to levelling power by valuing the competences and capabilities of all participants – not just those with more power or authority. It is grounded in mutual respect. |
| Role-taking | The balance and integration of different formal and informal roles depending on the situation. | People take on different roles depending on what the context requires. Roles are influenced by power dynamics and perceptions of hierarchy. Maintaining mutuality on roles is important as participants expect consistency from project partners. |
| Mutual expectations | Anticipated obligations associated with different roles | Failing to balance the potentially contrasting expectations associated with different roles can result in loss of trust or conflict. Flexibility and context awareness are required as mutual expectations change with the relationship. |

*Table 8.1 (continued) A synthesis of the main features of establishing and maintaining mutuality*

# Chapter 9. Building a shared relational identity

This chapter presents the last of the three themes developed in the Framework for Relational Literacy: ‘Building a shared relational identity’. It is a larger and more complex theme than the previous two; to properly nuance it and unpack its sub-themes, it is necessary to establish key terms and concepts and to define them in the context of this research. Therefore, this chapter is structured slightly differently from Chapters 7 and 8.

Firstly, I offer a definition of ‘relational identity’ by drawing on relevant literature (§ 9.1). I also address the importance of cultural, organisational and design context to building a shared relational identity in DSI. Section 9.2 introduces and exemplifies the sub-themes of ‘preservation of individuality’ and ‘focus on reciprocal attunement’ as two relational dynamics associated with building a shared relational identity that are simultaneously opposed and interrelated. Section 9.3 examines the designers’ identity and exemplifies processes of dialogical reflection on a variety of themes connected with building a shared relational identity.

## 9.1 Definitions and contextualisation

Relational identity is a construct that integrates individual, inter-personal and collective levels of self (Sluss & Ashforth 2007, p. 13). It forms an individual’s (or a group’s) perception that they are associated with another person or group (Shapiro, 2010); it is a specific sense of ‘we’, rather than ‘you and I’, that is shared in the relationship (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p. 197). Personal qualities and characteristics based on the role(s) each party has in the relationship are brought together into a new, shared idea of the relationship which is more than just the sum of individual dispositions and role expectations (ibid.). Relational identity stems from and is supported by a shared relational culture, that is, “a privately transacted system of understandings” (Wood, 1982, p. 76) that helps people coordinate behaviours.

Similarly to what is described in § 8.4 on mutuality in role-taking and mutual expectations, parties enacting their respective roles in a relationship tend to come to a mutual understanding of their shared relational identity (Sluss & Ashforth 2007, p. 13).

In other words, people in a relationship strive to agree on what is this 'we' they have created. However, having a shared relational identity can also affect the role- and person-based identities which constitute it (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Imahori & Cupach, 2004). We are constantly situated in a web of relationships, and we define ourselves based on these perceived relationships (Shapiro, 2010, p. 636); we have varying levels of identification with our role, and varying levels of disposition to change our self-perception and conform to the collective.

This interpersonal perspective is relevant to social innovation initiatives, as these are often centred on smaller teams doing project-based work where dyadic interaction and personal connections create the immediate context for collaboration. Moreover, since social innovation is predicated on the reconfiguration of relationships, it seems fitting to examine this phenomenon at various scales – including individual identities and dyadic relationships – rather than focusing solely on impact on larger structures and systems. Identities and identifications may be the "cognitive and affective glue" (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007, p. 10) that holds teams, projects, and organisations together.

### 9.1.1 The importance of context

In conversations with practitioners and with the Practice Group, context – defined by Kyriakidou & Özbilgin (2006, p. 5) as "the whole structure of connections between components that gives components their meaning" – appeared very important to building a shared relational identity. When discussing cultural practices in Southeast Asia, Sophie noted that the context of the relationship, more than the individuals' decisions, determines whether parties will engage in building a shared relational identity:

> *"It depends on [...] whether the external environment requires you to have a shared identity or not. In fact, if it's detrimental to the external environment, then it dies there [...] That no longer becomes a part of yourself, if that makes sense. [...] [It] continues because it's contextual. Once the context disappears, then it also disappears, because there's no reason otherwise for that to exist". (Sophie)*

Discussing his experience as a European practitioner in Southeast Asia, Victor also commented on the importance of developing intimate relationships at work, which are entirely context-based:

> *"There is this level of [...] intimacy that you need to have, people somehow need to be more or less best friends, or friends at least, when they work together in a team. And when they don't work together anymore then they're not friends anymore. I mean, there's nothing bad happening between them, but they're just not so much in contact anymore and then they have new friends in a different office." (Victor)*

Participants' remarks prompt two observations. Firstly, cultural context is relevant to discussing shared relational identity (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Secondly, each person has a socially situated identity which includes specific roles (such as colleague or friend); one's socially situated identity can shift in terms of a particular interpersonal relationship in a specific context, such as the workplace with its relational culture (Cupach & Imahori, 1993)

### 9.1.2 DSI projects as a contextual boundary

Having reviewed the importance of cultural and organisational contexts to the construction of a shared relational identity, it is now useful to focus briefly on the significance of DSI projects as contexts of building a shared identity.

Research suggests that a relationship can evolve from being more instrumental, with mutual attraction, affect or liking and, in some cases, an economic exchange having more relevance, to being an end in itself, with parties involved showing reciprocal commitment (Ferris et al., 2009, see § 2.3.1). Aspects of instrumentality relate to how one is regarded, to what social or material resources they can offer to achieve a goal, and to their perceived predictability; a more developed relationship emphasises affect and support, reciprocal commitment, flexibility, and friendship.

**INSTRUMENTAL INTERACTIONS**
Economic/social exchange
Reputation
Negotiation of roles
Attractiveness
Consistency

**INCREASED INTERPERSONAL COMMITMENT**
Trust
Affect
Support
Flexibility
Commitment
Friendship

*Figure 9.1 A diagram summarising the linear development of a work relationship described in Ferris et al. (2009).*

An analysis of conversations with practitioners, however, showed that relationships in designing social innovation do not necessarily develop with such linearity. Some practitioners, for example, framed projects as instrumental to relationships – not the other way around:

> *Viola: "[Y]ou think relationships are important to the success of your work, it seems to me [...]".*
>
> *Leon: "The question almost implies that there is a linear flow. [...] [That] the relationships are important to getting to the outcome. And I want to turn that around. In my view, the outcome, the products, the project [are] an excuse for us to build relationships. [They are] a symptom of our relationship development [...] [C]ertainly I need a project [...] as an excuse to build those relationships. [...] [Relationship is] not a means to an end. It is the end."*
>
> *Alba: "[R]elationships come first. [...] [T]he outcome of what you do when you are together, that comes later. [...] First there is how are we together and do we belong, and do we have a community, and do we have the relationships of support and care with each other?"*

Projects and initiatives in DSI are "useful to relationships" (Alba) in that they provide a contextual boundary, a field within which continued interaction is possible and encouraged and shared relational identities can be built, maintained, and transformed.

Similarly, Anne's decision to fund projects to "buy time" to build relationships (see § 7.2) is an act of generosity aimed at establishing a shared project as a context where relationships can be explored and nurtured. Anne too questioned the apparent linearity of relationship building:

> *"One of the most commonly asked questions that I get is [...] 'How do you know that you've made it as a trusted relationship?'. My answer to that is 'Well, you never really do'. There's not really a checklist of A, B, C that you can point to. [...] It's an ongoing intentional process that you have to nurture." (Anne)*

Relationships continuously re-create the context for their development; the context is changed by changing the relationships or, in other words, by creating social innovations.

The above proposition seems coherent with Mulgan's (2007) and Manzini's (2012) definition of social innovation as simultaneously stemming from and creating new relationships, as they configure relationships as a starting point and an end goal of social innovation. However, these definitions seem to assume that relationships and the identities, interests, goals, and preferences of those involved in them are fixed elements waiting to be reconfigured by design. This way, 'context' is presented as a sort backdrop that designers animate with their action. Popular design thinking tools such as personas or stakeholder maps support this view by depicting those involved in an innovation process and their relationships as static figures captured at a moment in time. A relational perspective is fundamentally opposed to this approach (Kyriakidou & Özbilgin, 2006): permanence cannot be assumed, because identities are constituted and reconstituted within communities involving cultural values and interpersonal relationships (Ashforth & Sluss, 2006; Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013; Light & Akama, 2012; Yee & White, 2016).

Having made the above considerations, designing social innovation can be defined as the engagement with a dynamic context of existing relationships that involves building shared relational identities and accepting identity shifts that simultaneously depend on the context and change it. These shifts are not necessarily explicit or easily identifiable, but can be surfaced by observing the dynamics associated with them. In the following sections, I present the dynamic identified through this research: the interplay between the preservation of individuality and the cultivation of reciprocal attunement.

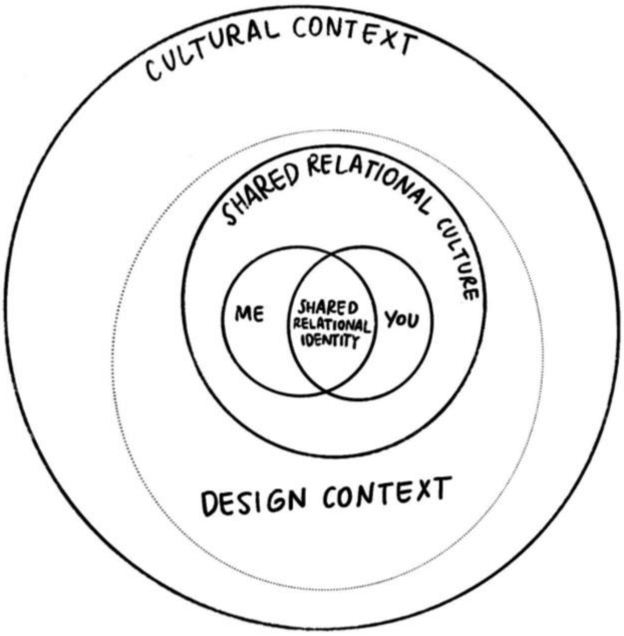



*Figure 9.2 A diagram illustrating the relationship between cultural context; the contextual boundary offered by DSI projects; shared relational culture; and specific relational identities. Changes at one scale of the diagram reflect in other scales.*

## 9.2 Individuality and attunement

This analysis argues that the process of building a shared relational identity is characterised by a tension, and an overlap, between the preservation of individuality and the cultivation of reciprocal attunement. In other words, relational shifts have an impact on the identity of the parties involved in a relationship; when tending to these shifts, both parties might experience an ambivalence and a synergy between independence and interdependence.

Before observing the tensions and overlaps between them, I will describe what is meant by the terms ‘individuality’ and ‘attunement’ drawing from relevant literature, which has described these two concepts using various expressions.

Once again, Kasulis’s framework (2002) proves useful to observe the two concepts:

- An intimacy orientation views everything as related to everything else and sees processes and people as interdependent and inseparable. By virtue of their reciprocal attunement, people can enter a locus of intimacy (Kasulis, 2002, p. 51).
- An integrity orientation sees things as independent, unrelated, and tied by external relationships that arrange them in a specific order without changing their fundamental structure. "The person of integrity maintains the individuality of others as well as his or her own" (Kasulis, 2002, p. 55).

Shapiro (2002) describes "affiliation" and "autonomy" as "relational identity concerns", or the main motives why people associate. While affiliation is "the degree and valence of each party's emotional connection *with the other*", autonomy describes each party's "freedom and independence *from the other"* (2002, p. 636; cursive in original text). The relational context establishes norms surrounding the appropriate extent of autonomy and affiliation in any relationship; if relational identity concerns remain unaddressed, they generate negative emotions and antagonistic behaviour, while cooperation and positive emotions result from well addressed relational identity concerns.

Similarly, Wiggins (1991) analyses the concepts of "agency" and "communion" as "fundamental modalities of human experience" (1991, p. 89) and lists a wealth of sources where these concepts are used to categorise worldviews; psychology approaches; social, interpersonal, and gendered behaviours; and uses of language.

Finally, relational identities are described as constituted by three layers of self (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007):

- An individual level, which is driven by self-interest and independence and focuses on skills, traits, goals, and performance.
- A collective level, which focuses on intergroup comparisons, group norms, and sees self as the member of a group aiming at collective welfare.
- An interpersonal level, which focuses on one's role-related relationships and is driven by interdependence, personal connection, and intimacy, aiming at the dyad's welfare.

The interpersonal dimension draws on and helps integrate the personal and collective dimensions (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Coherently with this proposition, this research has focused mainly on the interpersonal, dyadic dimension of relationships.

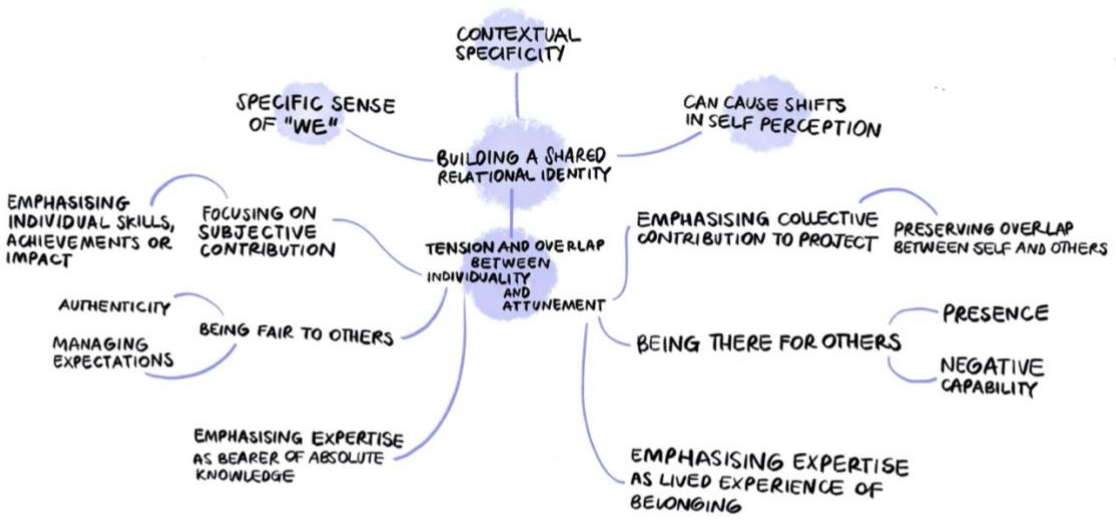



*Figure 9.3 Diagram of the theme 'Building a shared relational identity' with its subthemes*

As summarised in Figure 9.3, this research has found that foregrounding reciprocal attunement implies focusing on collective, rather than subjective, contribution to a project, initiative, or relationship. This involves seeking and preserving overlap between self and others, and regarding that overlap as generative. A focus on subjective contribution to collaborative work emphasises individual skills, achievements or impact, and each person's predisposition to build relationships or work with others.

Attunement might imply a willingness to cultivate presence and negative capability[7], focusing on being *there* for others; conversely, a propensity for individuality might imply wanting to be *fair* to others (Kasulis 2002, p. 120), for example by striving to be authentic in a relationship or managing expectations about one's performance.

[7] The term 'negative capability' was coined by poet John Keats, and then developed by Bion (1970) in psychoanalytic theory. It indicates a state of openness, mindful receptivity and humility in the face of change and uncertainty. Its significance has been discussed in the context of social work (Cornish, 2011) and facilitation (De Sario, 2006), among others.

Finally, a process of collective attunement leads to the development of deeply contextual, internal knowledge that cannot be separated from each knower's sense of belonging to a group or a place – markedly different from individuality's emphasis on expertise as the bearer of absolute, external knowledge.

Referring to the significance of cultural context to building a shared relational identity (§ 9.1.1), an intimacy cultural orientation would support an attunement-based approach to relationships in DSI, while an integrity cultural orientation favours an individuality-based approach. However, as exemplified and explored in the following paragraphs, individuality and attunement can be cultivated even in cultural contexts that do not support them. This can generate relational tensions and nuances.

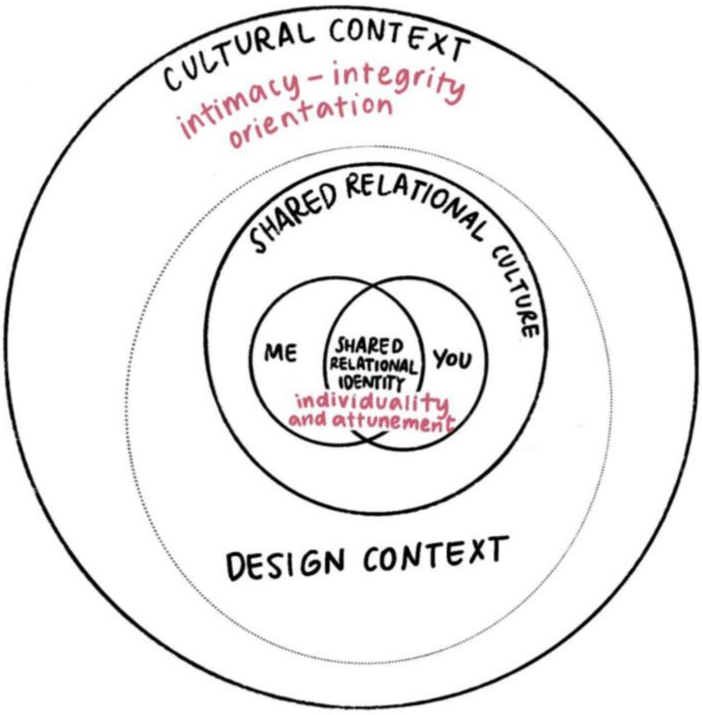



*Figure 9.4 A diagram illustrating intimacy and integrity orientations as attributes of the cultural context; individuality and attunement as attributes of building a shared relational identity. An intimacy cultural orientation supports attunement, and an integrity cultural orientation supports individuality, but attributes of a shared relational identity can emerge even in contexts that do not support them.*

### 9.2.1 An example of attunement in an intimacy orientation: Thomas's work

Dynamics of reciprocal attunement surfaced during the collaborative mapping exercise (Figure 9.5) illustrating the work of Thomas and his collaborators. In a group conversation held during the field research in Malaysia (see § 3.2.2), different practitioners mapped out networks and projects they were involved in (light blue), key people in those projects (blue), the activities and priorities of the projects (yellow), and relationship attributes, or values, that were present in each project (pink). The creation of this map marked the end of my field work in Malaysia, during which I had met with Thomas's collaborators for separate conversations and visits to different projects.

Participants in the collaborative mapping exercise extensively discussed their relationships. It was clear that relationships were not just regarded as important or beneficial to the projects and initiatives they listed, but that interdependence permeated all projects and, indeed, the participants' lives. Rather than building intimacy for the purpose of the initiatives, participants were engaging in the contextual specificities of their relationships, thus finding and enhancing their commonalities. The projects emerged from their intimate relationship in and with a specific context.

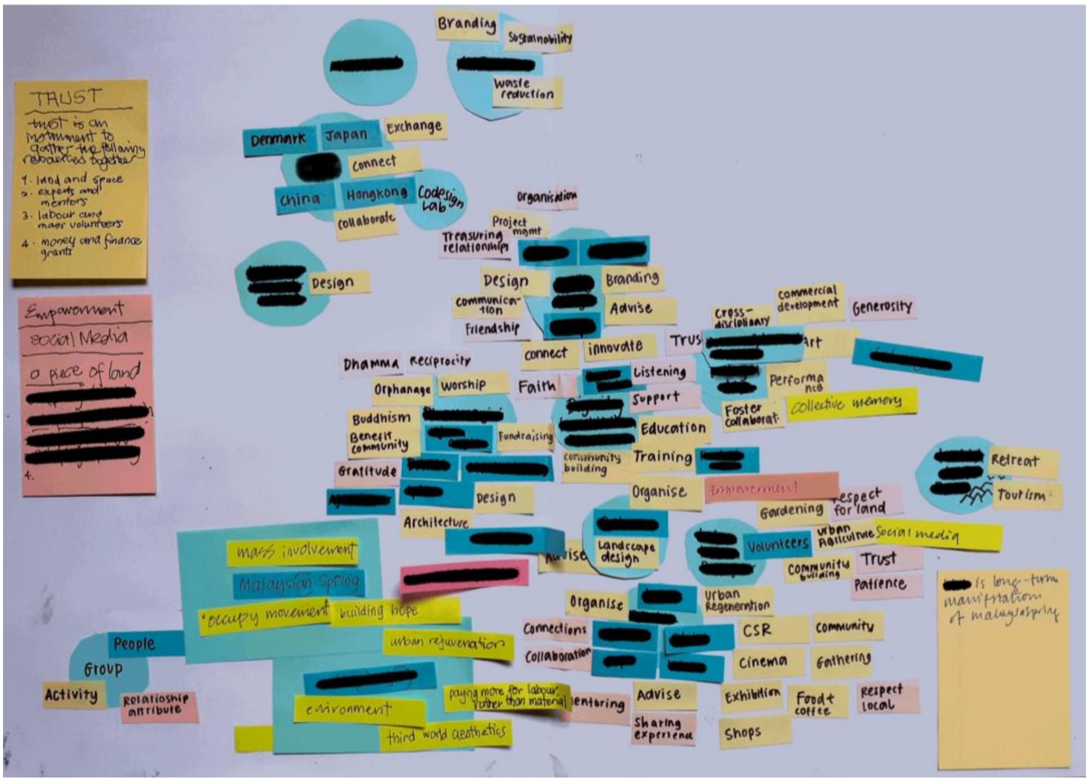



*Figure 9.5 A collaborative map of projects, contributors, activities and values built with Thomas and other participants in Malaysia.*

For example, the project of an orphanage and Buddhist centre was initiated by Ajahn Thanh, a Buddhist monk and friend of Thomas. I visited the site in Thailand in December 2019 and spoke with Ajahn Thanh; his voice quavered as he expressed profound gratitude towards Thomas, stressing how the project could not have happened without their friendship. In a separate conversation, Thomas too described Ajahn Thanh as his best friend; when Ajahn asked for help to design the orphanage, Thomas gathered some of his friends (architects, photographers, directors) and they used this opportunity to travel together and benefit the local community. The end project (a masterfully designed building, perfectly integrated with its rural surroundings) is borne out of this friendship; it symbolises and strengthened the bond between those involved.

I could not take for granted that I would be let in on these intimate relationships during my short stay in Thailand and Malaysia. After all, I was an outsider, someone coming from elsewhere for a few weeks to investigate relationships that participants had been building for decades. I learned about the orphanage, its design and construction, its environmental and economic sustainability, the initiatives and local partnerships that sustain its operations, but the 'relational component' of the project could not be singled out and described as easily. During the collaborative mapping exercise, Thomas asked if Ajahn Thanh had told me about his personal story and his reason to build an orphanage; while he and other participants hinted that they knew intimate and personal details of Ajahn's story and motivation, they did not reveal them to me, and I chose not to intrude.

Personal, intimate knowing, situated accounts, and relational experiences imbue not only the project of the orphanage, but also the other initiatives described by Thomas and his friends. Many of them have a spiritual as well as a social dimension; for example, they organised a series of gatherings inviting people to share a meal and intimate stories about encountering ghosts on occasion of a traditional celebration that involves the Chinese community. Even with little experience and knowledge of the communities and contexts described by the people I met during my field visit, I understood that the power of their shared stories should not be underestimated.

In Thomas's experience, relationships are characterised by profound reciprocal attunement supported by an intimacy cultural orientation. The projects emerged as a consequence of relationships that were intimate, deep, and strong. Thomas recognised the importance of cultural context to the way he builds relationships:

> *The whole idea of how society is structured is based on relationships. Especially in Asia [...] [W]e are still very much a Confucius influenced society. So a relationship [...] becomes the core ingredient, the fabric of everyday life. (Thomas)*

### 9.2.2 An example of attunement in an integrity orientation: *Building belonging in schools*

The deeply personal, intimate quality of Thomas's projects is markedly different from the schematic approach of *Building belonging in schools.* The project started with a rather impersonal call for proposals by a funding body. Dario was hired as a consultant to respond to the call, and involved me, and every other project partner, because of our skills and anticipated contribution to the project. The project did not emerge from the relationship between interdependent entities, incorporated into specific contexts – or, at least, such a description would sound quite bizarre to the people involved. Instead, the project required a clear attribution of expertise and responsibility to partners; the abstraction of a model or method for replication elsewhere; and the identification of clear performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of project activities.

Nevertheless, Dario and I tended to the relationship between us and with project partners with generosity and care; thanks to this research, I became increasingly aware of the relational nuances of our work. *Building belonging in schools* was the catalyst of the relationship between Dario and me, and between us and the teachers; while it was rooted in an integrity cultural orientation, it created the context for Dario and me to deepen our 'professional friendship' and focus on reciprocal attunement, and provided a contextual boundary in which we could tend to relationships with and between project partners. While nurturing relationships in *Building belonging in schools* was not always easy, particularly during times of lockdown and social distancing, we at least partially succeeded, judging from the affectionate messages we exchanged with some teachers after the end of the project. Dario and I went on to work on more projects together, renewing the reciprocal commitment to our professional friendship.

### 9.2.3 The tension and overlap between individuality and attunement

Discourse on individuality and attunement does not seek to set a dualism where one element can only be understood as distinguished from the other, but rather invites to consider both orientations and be mindful of their interplay. While attunement- or individuality-based approaches can be foregrounded when building a shared relational identity, it would be rare for one approach to be completely excluded and play no part in the construction of a shared relational identity.

Often, practitioners involved in this research described tensions and overlaps between the two. Some brought anecdotes of reciprocal attunement, but also reported a desire to be fair to others, to not make promises that they cannot maintain, to manage expectations, to be recognised as experts. In other cases, these behaviours were at the centre of our conversations, but accompanied by a desire to build a more intimate relationship by cultivating presence, facing uncertainty together, and developing a sense of affinity with others.

Tensions and overlaps between individuality and attunement have consequences on how designers relate to others, and on how they perceive themselves. Being aware of the dynamics between individuality and attunement can support designers in observing shifts in their own identity and self-perception as they navigate the relationships they form in DSI.

## 9.3 The designer's identity between individuality and attunement

The identity of the designer is a debated topic within DSI. Escobar (2017) wonders what it would mean to take seriously the insights of relationality in design work, and concludes that it would require “active inner work” (2017, p. 157) and the willingness and patience to deconstruct the dualist ways of being, thinking and doing that form the “ontological background” (2017, p. 83) of design theory and practice and that have been internalised by most designers. Manzini claims that “we are all designers” (2015, p. 1) and “every subject, whether individual or collective, [...] in a world in transformation must determine their own identity and their own life project” (ibid.). He also worries about expert designers' role either being reduced to just a “process facilitator” doing “post-it design” (2015, p. 66) without bringing any creative contributions, or falling into an egotistical approach that centres the designer’s expertise and marginalises the experience of community members and other participants (ibid.).

Le Dantec and Fox (2015) stress that roles, identities and positions are not exclusively defined by designers, but are the result of a negotiation process and sometimes fully attributed by others; Clarke et al. (2016) remind us that situatedness cannot be fully known and reported on, as it pertains to a self that is continually reshaped, and the complexity of identity can only be perceived as roles are performed in context.

The outcomes of this research align with the concerns described above. Some practitioners were acutely aware of the tensions, contradictions and nuances associated with identity in DSI work. Others did not necessarily approach the matter critically during our discussion, but tensions and overlaps surfaced in their anecdotes and stories: identity shifts were sensed in situated interaction, and accounted for through examples and dialogic observation of the variety of emotional responses they generated. Identity shifts can make designers feel challenged or even threatened, but also foster a sense of belonging and community, satisfaction, and pride. Emotional involvement happens at a personal level, where a desire to belong, be present, be flexible and hold space where possibilities can emerge coexists with a wish that expertise and prowess are recognised, that expectations are clear, that values are unscathed and design solutions generate a clear impact.

The following paragraphs exemplify processes of reflection that took place in dialogue with practitioners and colleagues. They describe the questions, concerns and dilemmas that surfaced by collaboratively reflecting on our roles and identities; our sense of belonging; hierarchy; self-awareness; loyalty; and authenticity. They also highlight the opportunities, the accomplishments and the pleasures connected with building a shared relational identity. In this process, individuality and attunement are intermeshed, and their tensions and overlaps contribute to shift and shape the practitioners’ self-perception.

### 9.3.1 Practitioners interrogate their roles and identities

Practitioners discussed the intersection between their roles and their identity in DSI projects. When talking about his role as a designer, Thomas compared himself to a doctor, who provides a diagnosis and prescribes the therapy but is also able to tune into the patient's fear and need for support and empathy. Lamai, who is originally from Thailand, compared her design work to preparing food. When taking a cooking course in a Western city, she noticed that every recipe was detailed and meticulously followed. She contrasted this methodical approach with the more intuitive way food is prepared in Thailand, leaving more space to "be[ing] open to the unexpected, to intuition". Both examples show that the role of the experts is not negated: the doctor, the chef, the designer are not taken out of the process or deprived of their role in the name of equal participation. However, their contribution expands beyond what is expected of their role to include attuning to others, to the situation and its contingencies. This can bring practitioners to not only identify with other roles beyond their formal or professional ones, but also to prioritise this identification, should the context need it.

Cultivating an openness to shifts in roles was an essential component of my work with Dario in *Building belonging in schools*. Over the course of three years, keeping a clear boundary between our respective functions and purpose in the project became less significant compared to being able to work in harmony. Building a shared relational identity had an impact not only on our ability to support each other, but also how our roles and responsibilities were perceived by project partners. For example, during the second year of the project, I felt that one of the teachers, despite my efforts to communicate, remained distant and always contacted Dario rather than me. Towards the end of the project, the teacher and I had established frequent contact and she called me even for matters that Dario was responsible for. She justified this by telling me she felt that Dario and I were, in her words, "one and the same". Here, the tension between individuality and attunement manifested as my ambivalence: although I wanted the teacher to contact me, when she finally did, I resisted responding on behalf of Dario, as I felt I was overstepping a boundary between our roles. As time went on, I became increasingly comfortable with our overlap (and so did Dario). Although our roles remained the same on paper, Dario and I had developed, and thus were perceived as, one coherent identity, which reflected positively on the relationships with teachers and helped us build trust and mutual understanding.

### 9.3.2 Practitioners interrogate their belonging

Practitioners reflected on how their sense of belonging (or not belonging) to a specific group, context, or situation shapes how they perceive themselves and negotiate their identity in DSI.

Somchai, for example, explained that working in community projects over the years he has developed a "membership", or a sense of belonging, to a group of community architects. His identity of "community architect", he clarified, is meaningful in that it is publicly recognised by his students, by community members and colleagues, and has positively impacted on his work and his reputation. Moreover, within this group he can cultivate what he defined "close friendships", where everyone can understand what the other is thinking just by exchanging a meaningful glance:

> *"I wouldn't say it's a new family, but it's kind of– we need to understand each other [quickly] [...] sometimes [when working] in the communities we look at each other's faces and say, 'Okay, this is not good now, we need to share ideas'[...]. So we need to realize what everyone is thinking." (Somchai)*

Somchai's shared relational identity with his colleagues is not only a source of professional satisfaction, meaning and pride, but also allows the whole team to intuitively attune to each other and to the contingencies and the needs of the communities it is serving.

Somchai, Anne and Sophie also reported that the presence of a common challenge or adversity that a group has to face can foster a sense of belonging and the construction of a shared relational identity. To Sophie, the "maturity" of the relationship is crucial in this phase: she described it as a condition in which, in the face of shared adversity, a desire to maintain one's autonomy does not translate into egoism but into respect for the other and in a desire to collaborate.

The tension and overlap between individuality and attunement are also evident in Lucy's reflections on belonging to a community and a context. Lucy is Pākehā (a non-Maori New Zealander of European descent) and works with Indigenous communities in

Aotearoa New Zealand. She is mindful of her identity and how it reflects on her roles and actions:

> *"[W]hat does it mean [...] to be European? I'm Pākehā, my ancestry is as a settler. So how do I practice in a participatory way in the context of the politics here, given that social innovation is targeted towards Maori and Pacific communities, because those are the communities that are completely disenfranchised and have entrenched disadvantage?" (Lucy)*

In this context, Lucy chooses to take a supporting role; her work is, in her words, "at the edge of practice" and consists of supporting the teams that work in community:

> *"[H]istorically I might've done frontline work, where I was working with young people or going in interviewing people [...] design research, [...] or doing prototyping or running workshops with community members. My work is less about that now because I'm supporting a team of people who come from the communities in which they're trying to do the change. And so, they own the relationships with people. (Lucy)*

Lucy's awareness of the implications of her identity allows her to take a step back and let the group focus on meaningful collective contribution. A desire to be fair to others and respect their identity does not cause her to disengage from the project but translates into a way to cultivate presence that is appropriate to the existing relationships.

Some practitioners also reported attempting to adapt to contexts they do not necessarily belong to. For example, Rose and Somchai try to minimise the appearance of difference between them and project partners by purposely dressing down to go and meet certain community members; Rose, who is originally European, learned the local language to communicate fluently with collaborators; in Grace's organisation, practitioners spend time "immersing" in the local community at the beginning of a project. However, as Nora pointed out during one of our Practice Group conversations, 'immersing in community' and 'belonging to the community' are different and should not be confused: while belonging is a consequence of having a shared relational identity, immersion is a strategy performed with the intent to understand the context and harmonise with others, and potentially build a shared identity. Practitioners framed flexibility and openness as specific relational skills they possess and that make them adaptable to different contexts.

### 9.3.3 Practitioners question hierarchy

Power and hierarchy can also affect the construction of a shared relational identity, and can be approached in more or less strategic ways.

Somchai, for example, described a hierarchy-related relational identity shift in a relationship with a junior colleague of his. In Thailand, a hierarchical system based on seniority is common and mostly positively valued (Wiriyapinit, 2016): Somchai described himself as the senior, his colleague as a junior, and explained that he would expect his junior colleague to show respect and abide by his advice. In Thai culture, however, social status is very context-based and social hierarchy is not perceived as rigidly as in Western cultures (Vorng, 2011): since Somchai's junior colleague was also a member of the community they were working with on a specific project, their shared identity shifted depending on the context. Somchai realised he was no longer in the position to direct his colleague's actions and had to show him more respect because "[w]e normally respect [those who have] worked on-site longer than us" (Somchai). This example shows how power and building a shared relational identity intersect and are influenced by the cultural context.

Identity shifts do not always happen so smoothly in unequal power relationships. For example, Anne begins a relationship with the rigidly preassigned and powerful role of funder, while her Foundation's grantees enter the relationship in a position of lesser power. Anne reported that the expectations pertaining to her role are geared towards individuality because of how the funding landscape operates generally. Power dynamics could bring her to impose her Foundation's identity, values, and way of working on project partners; she also noted that "[t]here's a risk that [...] you end up funding people just like you" (Anne). However, Anne aims to establish an equitable relationship where she does not just represent the Foundation, but also becomes a confidante, even a friend, welcoming partners into a network and enabling them to source new partners. When she attempts to transcend the bounds of her role as a funder and build a genuine partnership with her organisation's grantees, Anne is often met with suspicion and resistance:

> *"[W]e value trust and partnership and values alignment deeply [...] and we work really hard to build it. I tend to find with new partners there can be understandably a reticence around 'Okay, what does that actually mean? [...] Really? Is that just the latest kind of jargon thing?'" (Anne)*

When the construction of a shared relational identity calls into question the role- and person-based identities that constitute it (for example by challenging one party's authority and the other's obedience), parties might be resistant to this shift (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Anne reports that building a shared relational identity in this context can take a long time; the process is characterised by a flow between individuality and attunement, and the need to create and hold a space – often a shared project or initiative – where identities can be transformed.

### 9.3.4 Practitioners cultivate self-awareness

Questioning roles, belonging and hierarchy when building a shared relational identity requires practitioners to have an awareness of their stance in relation to the context.

Leon and Alba, for example, took time to describe their personal history and experience and how these might surface in and influence their professional work. They expanded upon concepts of "sovereignty", of having, as Alba described it, a "power in oneself" and a "posture of certainty" rooted in a sense of belonging to a "social and geographical location" (Leon). They stressed the importance of learning to be oneself in a group, to be "an 'I' and a 'We', simultaneously" (Leon), to hold complexity and contradictions when building a shared relational identity.

This language and reasoning remind of the work of Akama and Light (2018) on practices of readiness: through an awareness of personal histories, experiences, philosophies and culture, designers ready themselves to intervene in the contingent and uncertain situations of co-design. The authors delineate "punctuation and poise" (Akama and Light, 2018, p. 2): punctuation describes "an attunement to working with and immersing in the flow, gaps and rhythms of changing", while poise "shares characteristics of self-awareness, of being emplaced, and a contemplation of how one is and acts". Relationality in DSI requires designers to know who they are and what has shaped their posture, while simultaneously cultivating the capacity to let go of all certainty and let the contingencies of a shared challenge change not only their behaviours, but how they perceive themselves in context. Observing these identity shifts, how we relax into them or resist them, is an essential part of relationality in DSI.

### 9.3.5 Practitioners reflect on loyalty

During one of our conversations, Dario mentioned the tension between attuning to the contingencies of a project and the need to remain loyal to one's organisation or client:

> *"When your shared relationship is strong, you can talk, dialogue, experience a connection with a person who belongs to a certain organisation, maybe even transcending the role you have in your organisation. [...] But we must all assume that, in the background, everyone is still loyal to their organisation. [...] In every partnership there are the interests of the project [...] and the legitimate self-referentiality of each organisation." (Dario)*

Sometimes, teachers and principals went beyond the mandate of their organisation or overstepped the boundary of their role to make the project happen. Dario and I enthusiastically referred to them as those who had "understood" the project: they had put the interests of the project (and of the relationships it catalysed) before their personal interests or those of school management. However, we also knew that teachers operated within the constraints of their profession, their school, their pre-existing relationships. A similar type of "loyalty" tied us to the Training Centre:

> *"In* Schools at the heart of the community*, we were able to move freely, but we could not forget that we were appointed by the Training Centre to accomplish a number of tasks." (Dario)*

Dario and I had to be loyal and responsive to multiple contexts: the relationship between us two, our relationship with the organisation that entrusted us, and with the schools and the teachers. Identity shifts in each of these contexts influenced the others: as the relationship between Dario and me developed, so did our relationship with teachers; as we developed a shared sense of 'we', the quality of our work improved, reflecting positively on our relationship with the Training Centre.

Reflections on loyalty and belonging are also part of my experience in the Community Centre, which was characterised by tensions and ambivalences. Although I could count on a few friends and volunteers brokering my relationship with members of the Community Centre, I approached it essentially as an outsider. Over time, it became clear to me that I had entered a space that stemmed from, and was sustained by, the initiative of a group of people. It was their relationship that kept the Community Centre open and running and, vice versa, the Community Centre provided the context for that relationship to continue. Greta and I often discussed that many of the volunteers, and Board members in particular, identified with the place, spent most of their free time there, and cultivated most of their friendships within that community: intimacy (Kasulis, 2002) kept the Community Centre alive. This dynamic could sometimes clash with the fact that the organisation's formal structure required the presence of a Board, a clear division of responsibilities, a statutory attribution of power, the control of an Assembly, and the subordination to a local and a national network of community centres: the system's structure was rooted in integrity.

These two contexts coexisted and enabled attunement-based and individuality-based approaches to relationships, sometimes creating contradictions and tensions that were difficult to resolve. For example, some members of the Committee (which was tasked by the Board to organise a programme of cultural events) found that having to ask formal permission to the Board to organise events was nonsense: what was the point of all these formalities, when they were all friends? Some suggested that the power lent to the Committee should be discussed in the Assembly, but others questioned the need to summon all members of the Community Centre to formally decide on something that had not been appropriately experimented with, and demanded to move freely within a space that they had contributed to create and maintain. As the Committee catalysed a shared identity, members found it hard to simultaneously maintain loyalty to their friendships, to formal and informal divisions of power, and to the Committee itself. This struggle was exacerbated when Board members joined the Committee *en masse*. Greta's comment (as a member of both the Board and the Committee) shows that key conversations were being held in multiple contexts, resulting in confusion and conflict:

> *"I don't have a clear perception of [the time when the Committee dissolved], because everything was mixed for me: Committee, Board, relationships between people [...] what you said in one group, spilled into the other. I was at the centre of these two sets, and debates were held on both sides." (Greta)*

When the Committee was disbanded by the Board, some volunteers perceived it as a violation. The Committee had lasted enough to bring some volunteers closer together and give them a sense of purpose, and some of us were hurt when this was taken away. I too had experienced the formation of a shared sense of 'we' with some volunteers, including with Greta:

> *"I think that for you and me, the attunement that had developed in the Committee encouraged both to meet outside of that context. We looked for other external inputs. [...] Even an imploding situation led two people to look for inspiration elsewhere." (Greta)*

Eventually, Greta resigned from the Board of the Community Centre, but continues to be a volunteer. At the time of writing, we are managing a project involving another organisation in the provincial network; I have discussed with Greta the preoccupation that our engagement with another organisation might be interpreted as a 'betrayal' of the Community Centre.

Over the course of three years, I went from being an outsider, to volunteering, to co-managing a project within the network of community centres. Periodically, Greta encourages me to seek a formal role in the network, but I have always declined the offer. I, too, experience a tension between preserving my individuality, my independence, my 'neutrality' in a conflictual context, and wanting to be involved, to relate, to contribute to decisions, and to belong – formally and informally.

The reflections on identity, loyalty and belonging I shared with Greta and Dario show that it can be tricky to balance identities, affiliations, and memberships to different (and potentially conflicting) groups as they form within and around specific projects, initiatives, organisations, or relationships. Yet, engaging in this is unavoidable, as these dynamics are a key component of our relationships, our sense of belonging, our profession, and ultimately, our sense of self.

### 9.3.6 Practitioners reflect on authenticity

As mentioned in § 4.4.4, 'authenticity' was a common topic of discussion among Practice Group members involved in *Mutual aid relational practices*. Other than questioning the authenticity of relationships that were initiated and sustained entirely online, we interrogated the methods, tools, techniques, and strategies we practised with, examining their effects in our group as well as in our work and everyday life.

The training we received, and which initiated our Practice Group, focused on interpersonal dynamics of mutual aid and solidarity, and gave us a chance to experience, reflect, and observe our own behaviour in interaction. The training took place in a gracefully facilitated online space, where we were provided specific tools to practise with, clear instructions on how to approach them, and sharp time boundaries. The tools allowed us to practice intimacy in a safe, structured, and playfully experimental environment – one which, as we noted later in conversation, was mostly devoid of the usual risks of relating. We had consented to enter in a facilitated space that was disciplined by specific rules, and where we would expect to find compliant partners for specific exercises.

Returning to the 'real world' of day-to-day interactions in our respective organisations, we noticed that integrating this type of solidarity in our practice was much trickier than performing it in a Practice Group. Eric noted that interpersonal communication protocols were hardly effective "on the street", where they sounded "formulaic and quite weird" (Eric). To introduce solidarity practices in her organisation, Nora invited other members to take the same training, so that they could share a language and an approach.

Our discussion was not limited to the effectiveness of the tools across contexts, but extended to the intention driving the use of specific tools. Eric and Poe pointed out that tools that encourage openness, intimacy and attunement do not necessarily exclude deception and manipulation, and that "even well-meaning tools can be used to dominate people" (Eric). In a private conversation, Nora and I exchanged views on the idea of having a "facilitator voice": a purposely calm, collected, soft voice that we attributed to our facilitator persona. We wondered: was this persona acting to achieve compliance from participants and keep dissent in check? What and who was it in service of? Did our “facilitator voice” lend us an aura of professionalism and neutrality in contexts where we did not want to be questioned or criticised?

Sophie openly questioned specific approaches to conversations such as Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2002) or Theory U (Scharmer, 2009) because of what she called “white hippy branding”:

> *“Is it another framework? Who designed it? Why is it so popular? Is it part of worldviews? Is this cultural hegemony?” (Sophie)*

Tools shaped our interactions, interactions shaped our relationships, and our relationship shaped how we perceived ourselves in it. The need and desire to have a common language to communicate brought suspicion of where this common language came from, and whether applying it was sidelining other concepts, approaches and languages that felt more aligned to our cultures and our identities.

I, too, felt an ambivalence towards the tools and approaches we practised with. On the one hand, I appreciated the chance to exercise presence, active listening, mirroring, and other facilitation skills in the company of other interested people: I am convinced that the months spent with the Practice Group have made me a better facilitator, and a better human, in many ways. On the other hand, I knew tools – and their power to dictate our behaviour – could make attunement feel inauthentic, like we were performing it rather than embodying it.

Examining authenticity with the Practice Group surfaced, once again, a tension between individuality and attunement. The aim of our practice was to bring us out of individualism and into a more relational way of being; building a shared sense of ‘we’ as a group, we focused on being *there* for each other, we confided in each other, and cultivated a readiness for whatever was to emerge from our dialogue. Using codified methods to do this, although effective in influencing our behaviours, was accompanied by a concern for whether we were being *fair* to each other, showing up authentically to our group interactions and achieving a ‘true’ result.

## 9.4 Summary of Chapter 9

This chapter has examined ‘Building a shared relational identity’ as the third attribute of relationality in designing social innovation. It has defined ‘shared relational identity’ as the perception of being associated with another person or group – a sense of ‘we’ that integrates personal qualities, characteristics, and roles, and that in turn affects the individual identities that constitute it.

Cultural contexts, organisational contexts with their relational culture, and the context provided by a specific DSI project, as systems of relationships that create meaning, are crucial to the construction of a shared relational identity. Individual and collective identity transformations also affect the context, resulting in social innovation. This proposition questions the linear view of relationships as instrumental to DSI projects, and presents the design context as active, dynamic, and intermeshed with the construction of shared relational identities and the creation of social innovation.

In continuous reconfiguration of contexts and identities, parties in a relationship might experience an ambivalence between ‘individuality’ and ‘attunement’. Attributes of individuality and attunement are described in Table 9.1.

*Table 9.1 Attributes of individuality and attunement.*

| **Individuality** | **Attunement** |
|---|---|
| Focus on subjective contribution: preserving distinction between self and others | Focus on collective contribution: preserving overlap between self and others |
| Being *fair* to others: focusing on coherence and authenticity | Being *there* for others: focusing on presence and negative capability |
| Developing knowledge as absolute and external: *I know because I am an expert* | Developing knowledge as contextual and internal: *I know because I belong* |

Observing individuality and attunement through a cultural lens, an intimacy or integrity cultural orientation (Kasulis, 2002) support, respectively, an attunement- or an individuality-based approach to building a shared relational identity in DSI. However, just like intimacy and integrity are both present in a culture with different strengths, individuality and attunement also coexist in DSI processes.

The interplay between individuality and attunement reveals tensions and overlaps that characterise the process of building a shared relational identity. Dialogue with practitioners centred on these themes has surfaced details on how practitioners interrogate their role, their sense of belonging, power, and hierarchy in their relationships; on how they cultivate self-awareness amidst change; on specific relational concerns such as loyalty to different parties in a relationship or the ‘authenticity’ of relational bonds and identities. Reflecting on these dynamics can support designers in understanding shifts in their own identity and self-perception as they navigate relationships in DSI.

# Chapter 10. Scaffolding reflective, relational practice in DSI

Chapters 6-9 have introduced the Framework for Relational Literacy and explored the themes ‘Building a system of reciprocity’; ‘Establishing and maintaining mutuality’; and ‘Building a shared relational identity’. For each theme, I have presented nuances, tensions, and contradictions, exemplified by accounts of the experience of DSI practitioners in the Asia Pacific region and my experience in three different contexts of practice. Chapter 10 now considers the Framework in its entirety. It makes propositions for how the Framework can be used (§ 10.1); explains how it was developed (§ 10.2); identifies its limitations (§ 10.3); clarifies the challenges it may surface for DSI practitioners (§ 10.4), and concludes with some reflections and recommendations (§ 10.5).

## 10.1 Defining the Framework for Relational Literacy and its uses

As explained in Chapter 6, ‘relational literacy’ refers to the combination of self-reflection; collective sense-making; dialogue; embodied and situated knowledge that permeates the practices of designing, revealing, challenging systems made up of complex relationships. These practices are integrated into people’s everyday lives, situated in social, cultural, historical, political relationships, and embedded into structures of power. Observing and engaging in processes of self-reflection and dialogical sense-making, I have constructed a Framework which aims to support practitioners in approaching DSI with a sensitivity to the nuances of relational dynamics.

My proposition is to use the Framework as a ‘scaffold’ for reflective, relational practice in DSI. Scaffolding “denotes a broad class of physical, cognitive and social augmentations [...] that allow us to achieve some goal that would otherwise be beyond us” (Clark, 1998, p. 163). Scaffolds are temporary, portable, flexible, emergent, generative, and constitutive of human activities and outcomes – that is, they serve as the basis for other constructive work by creating opportunities as well as limitations, and they change as needed (Woerner et al., 2005, p. 4). So, when I propose that the Framework for Relational Literacy can scaffold reflective, relational practice in DSI, what I mean is that it can provide us practitioners with a support for reflection on the multiple meanings of ‘relationality’ and encourage us to welcome nuance in our perspective. Practising DSI ‘relationally’ is to cultivate awareness of the entanglements between relationships and DSI initiatives and projects; the Framework is an example of how reflections on the topic can be carried out, and of the narrations, knowledge, and practices that can stem from them.

## 10.2 How the Framework was developed

In this section, I offer a less technical, more personal explanation and account of how the Framework for Relational Literacy evolved over the course of the study.

The development of the Framework is intimately tied to the evolution of the relationships that constitute it, and particularly to how I experienced and perceived them within an ever-changing context. Constructing the Framework through an analysis of experiences and dialogue required becoming attentive to a wealth of interactions and exchanges that are often ignored, sidelined, or relegated to the ‘backstage’ of the design process, but instead constitute an essential element of DSI. The contingent yet heartfelt exchanges that Dario and I had in the car going to and coming back from design workshops; fleeting conversations with teachers; informal chats with Greta over coffee at the Community Centre or elsewhere; even the process of collectively taking notes in the Practice Group were all ways in which we reflected collaboratively, and this sustained the construction of our relationship within a shared project. Similar processes characterised the relationships woven by the practitioners I interviewed – each with its specific, ever-changing tensions. Thus, the Framework does not only describe specific dynamics of relationality in DSI, but also indicates how cultivating relationships within the context of a DSI initiative is about meaning-making that is positioned and situated, about telling stories, about interpreting and co-creating.

As explained in previous chapters, the documentation of these interactions and reflections resulted in a variety of datasets: transcripts of interviews with external practitioners, colleagues and collaborators, notes taken collaboratively during meetings, collaborative maps, diary entries, and evocative accounts of events reconstructed on the basis of notes, memories, message logs, email exchanges. All these served as tools to make sense of my experience of relationship building; they are testimonials of how the relationships changed, and also of how I changed, evidenced by the language I chose, the emotions that transpire through the diary entries, the selection of which events I deemed important. Making sense of these changes through a rigorous data analysis process is essential to producing valid, reliable qualitative research: Chapter 5 provides an explanation of the data analysis, and various sections of the Appendix dive into further detail on the coding process, personal reflection, autoethnography, and how they were constructed. Appendix A, for instance, uses the subtheme “providing care” (in “Building a system of reciprocity”) as an example to describe the entire coding process. This was not as straightforward as it is depicted, and not all themes and sub-themes were built in the same way, but it serves as an example of how a theme was constructed.

There are, however, aspects of this process that are almost beyond description – and that certainly do not lend themselves to a linear, step-by-step account. They have to do with the more intimate (Kasulis, 2002) relationship I built with the data, with the people involved, and with myself. While constructing the Framework, I read through the interviews and through my diary entries several times. I listened to the recordings of my conversations with Dario, went through the messages with Greta, revisited notes from the Practice Group meetings, noticing subtle shifts in my perspective. The excerpts of my diary in Appendix E are an example of my difficulties redefining my role in the contexts of practice as the projects evolved, letting go of my preconception of what a “designer” is – with a set of tools, able to devise solutions for and with communities – and welcoming a more flexible yet blurred, uncertain, even precarious role, where I had to adapt and change according to others’ needs, while simultaneously tracing boundaries around what I could and could not do.

Through self-reflection and dialogue with other practitioners, I gradually developed the ability to describe some of the relational dynamics at play, and the language to describe them: I developed my relational literacy, and organised the concepts, dialogues and experiences relating to it into a Framework so that the process could be accessible to others. Each iteration of the Framework and of its representation (see Figure 10.1) is an attempt to make it more readable to myself and to others. I experimented with different types of connectors as I figured out how themes and subthemes related to one another, and ultimately chose to present them separately; I played with the terminology as I looked for the right words to explain my experiences; I went back to the literature and incorporated it in the study not only to ground the Framework in existing research, but also to further develop a language to understand myself and my experiences.

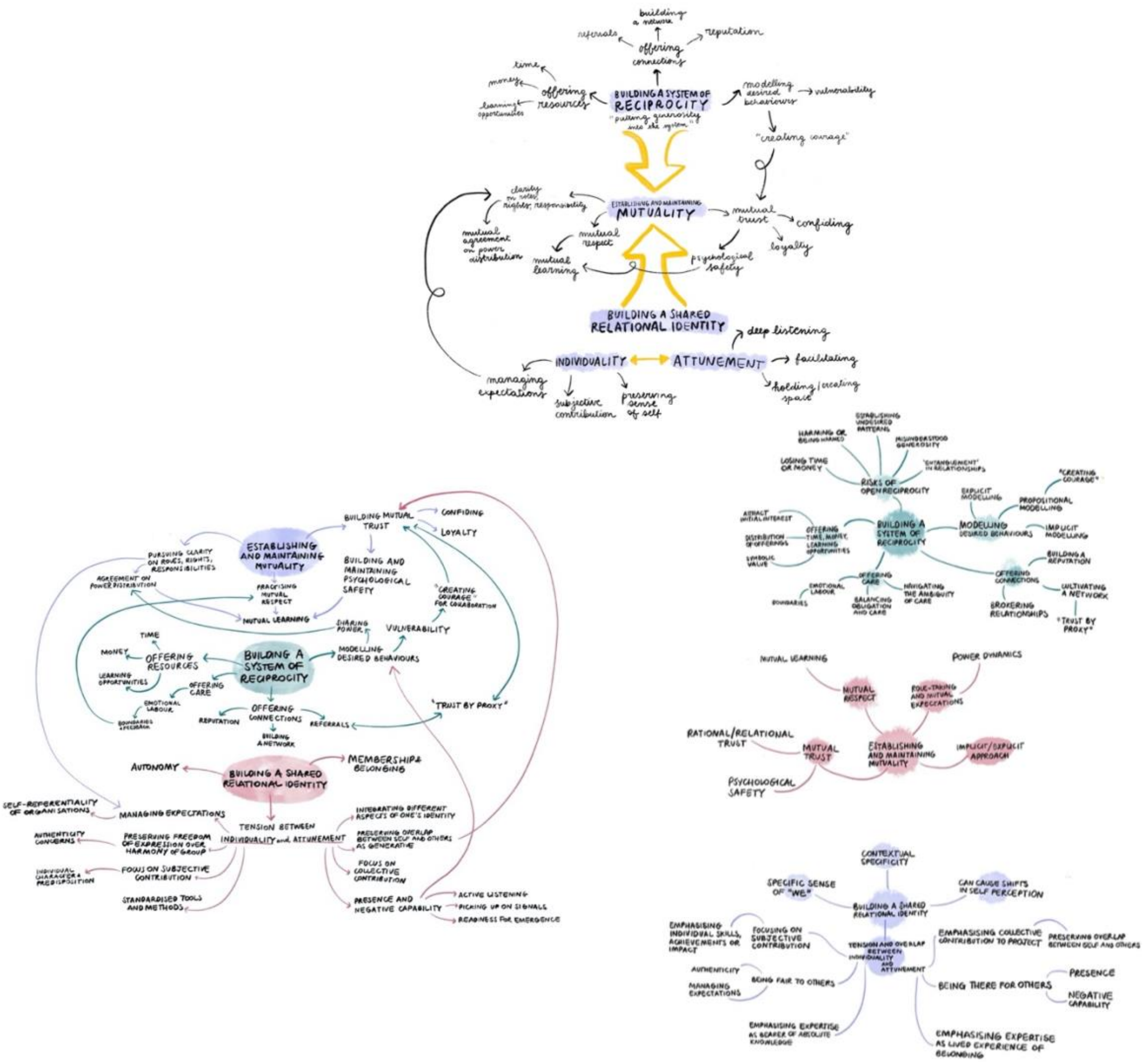



*Figure 10.1 Top to bottom, left to right: three iterations of the diagram illustrating the Framework for Relational Literacy (see Appendix A for details)*

This research process configures relational literacy as a much more nuanced matter than a set of codified skills – it is a process of building intimacy with one's practice, with the people involved in a DSI initiative, with the context where it takes place. Because of the way it was conceived, structured, and presented, the Framework also has limitations, which are explained in the following section.

## 10.3 What the Framework for Relational Literacy is not for

As anticipated in Chapter 6, it should be clear from these descriptions that the Framework for Relational Literacy is not intended as a model for what practising 'relationally' should look like. Its aim is not to present 'solutions' to relational 'problems', but rather to help practitioners acknowledge that relational difficulties (and joys!) are an inevitable experience of designing social innovation and precede, permeate, sustain, change, stem from, and succeed such initiatives. Co-designing shapes commitments and responsibilities with relationships and place, and thus cannot be a transferable methodology where knowledge and processes can be 'used' interchangeably. Thus, the Framework is not intended as a checklist of behaviours to adopt if we want design processes to 'be good' or 'do good' – it is not a morality, although it encourages us to consider different understandings of ethics in DSI (Akama & Light, 2018).

What this research offers is an account of a process of construction of meaning in a locality, with specific people with whom I have come to share reciprocal offerings, mutual understandings, and relational identities, informed by experiences of other practitioners immersed in different design, organisational and cultural contexts. Aiming to replicate my experience as I have narrated it would be an illusion, at best, and a chance to do harm, at worst. I developed the Framework for Relational Literacy to tell what I hope can be a useful story; but this story is about the people that participated in it and is narrated by my voice – it could not have been otherwise. It becomes useful as others engage with it and commit to telling theirs in what Bateson (2016) calls a 'symmathesy': "an entity formed over time by contextual mutual learning through interaction" (2016, p. 404). This learning will never be complete; it is a perpetual repositioning, redefining, responding in a context of multiple interactions (Bateson, 2016). It does not necessarily involve ‘improvement’ or ‘evolution’ but opens to adaptation. Moreover, it is not necessarily tied to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge or to intellectual development but welcomes and values embodied knowledge and intuition. Adopting a “transcontextual” perspective (Bateson, 2017) – that is, focusing on how multiple contexts come together to form complex, interdependent systems – “offers insight into where contextual overlap is reinforcing the status quo, and where it is loose enough to initiate shifts” (Bateson, 2017, p. 86). I believe acknowledging and revealing our positionality within the complex system of DSI and the multiple contexts that interact to constitute it, we can begin to reimagine our approaches to design research and practice.

## 10.4 Challenges and constraints for relational practice

Other than the themes identified in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, building the Framework for Relational Literacy has surfaced some challenges for relational practice, or constraints that practitioners face when envisioning and enacting a relational approach. These constraints are related to how sensitive issues can be addressed; to how DSI is conceived, taught, and perceived; and to structural barriers to its reimagination. The reflections in the following paragraphs also point to some limitations of this study and to possible avenues for future research; these topics are further discussed in the relevant sections of Chapter 11.

### 10.4.1 Expectations associated with DSI

Certain expectations are associated with DSI and DSI practitioners because of the dominant construction of DSI as a discipline rooted in integrity (in the meaning proposed by Kasulis, 2002), fixated on design thinking methods and tools and dismissive of the diverse contributions of non-designers to the process.

There is a tradition of reporting that centres the designer and prioritises methodical aspects of design, replicability, and scalability over situated participatory practice (Akama & Light, 2012) and experience of dynamics such as those described in this thesis. Law (2004, p. 9) notes that the disorderly, awkward, and fuzzy aspects of the work undergo tidying and organising to conform to a ‘hygienic’ reporting style, thus simplifying what could have been a rich, situated description. Even when mistakes and failures in DSI are reported on, the narrative can be tailored to fit a performative anticipation of success: for instance, prototyping, a core design activity, is framed by design thinking and transformation design as a way to ‘fail fast, fail often, fail early’ (Burns et al. 2006; Brown and Wyatt 2010). This view has been criticised in the context of social innovation, including by participants in this research. Anne’s organisation, for example, while promoting openness about mistakes, failures, and setbacks, avoids presenting them in a heroic way:

> *“I'm going to be a bit un-PC, sorry, it's not like a Silicon Valley ‘fuck up night’ type thing where you’re all like, ‘Yes, I failed!’” (Anne)*

Besides being criticised for its inability to deal with “complex problems” (Hillgren, Seravalli & Emilson, 2011), a culture of reporting sanitised, uniform experiences marginalises research processes that are essential to accountable, rigorous, ethical, and participatory research practice (St John & Akama, 2021) – such as allowing time for stories to be told with full consent and comfort – by relegating them to ‘pre-research’ processes or preliminary activities to the ‘proper’ design part. The gradual construction of relationships is often viewed as a mere preparation to the extraction of ‘data’ (which are, in fact, the participants’ lived experiences and stories) for the purpose of designing. This approach can alienate participants, mislead publics, and cultivate suspicion, resistance and indifference towards DSI, especially when it then fails to deliver the ‘solutions’ it promised (Tjahja, 2019). Victor, for example, described the frustration of a participant in a training programme who, disappointed by the lack of an unambiguous solution to his challenges, exclaimed: “Why are you teaching us all of this stuff [...]? I just want to learn how to make money!”. The dominance of universalised, mechanistic models and views reproduces beliefs that get in the way of approaching design as the complex social activity it is. In this context, it can be challenging for DSI practitioners to foreground relationality, as it is fundamentally at odds with the dominant design discourse.

### 10.4.2 Politics and power

Social hierarchy has been studied in many academic disciplines, but existing theories only partially apply to the context of DSI; DSI-specific studies are rare, and often overlook relevant aspects connected to local cultural contexts (one notable exception being Tjahja & Yee, 2018). The examples presented in Chapters 7-9 show that social hierarchy significantly affects DSI processes, both because of their participatory nature, and because of existing structures of power in organisations, communities and in design teams. Underestimating or misrepresenting the role of social hierarchy in processes of designing social innovation can rupture relationships and create tensions in groups, organisations, and communities; carefully considering the power dynamics at play in specific contexts, on the contrary, can lead to flexibility and adaptability to the flow of power. The accounts of practitioners have shown that, although Western understandings on status differentiation have had (and continue to have) a historical, global impact, indiscriminately applying them to various context and cultures can be problematic (see § 8.4.1). At the same time, I want to avoid an exoticising or idealising approach when considering the power dynamics accounted for by practitioners in Asia Pacific, which presented their tensions and cruxes. Practitioners' reports and my experience demonstrate that all relational work is embedded into structures of power. People have different relationships to these structures; their needs, and how they are met, are defined through relations of power, so that the whole process of social innovation is structured by inequality (Agid, 2011). In the practitioners' and in my experience, altering or working around these unequal relationships of power required significant energy, time, and sensitivity.

### 10.4.3 Sensitive issues

The examples presented in this thesis have begun to show the nuances of relationships in DSI. Chapters 7-9 invite us to explore the intricacies of: closed and open reciprocity; explicit, implicit, and propositional modelling of behaviour; rational and relational models of trust; explicit and implicit approaches to building mutuality; individuality and attunement in building a shared relational identity – among the endless other more or less subtle dynamics that characterise relationships in DSI. Compared to

IDEO's HCD model generic invite to "empathise" (IDEO, 2015), and Stanford d.school's *Ethnography Fieldguide*'s simplistic instruction to "be human, build rapport", "seek stories", and "talk about feelings" (d.school, 2019, p. 12), these reflections invite practitioners to acknowledge their positioning in the ever-shifting design context and to consider what biases they might bring to every interaction not just *before* the interaction takes place (d.School, 2019, p. 14), but *as interactions shape a relationship.*

Seeking stories and talking about feelings might uncover deeply personal and sensitive issues. The sometimes subtle approaches described in this thesis are intuitive responses to a need for sensitivity when approaching delicate topics such as power dynamics, hierarchy, conflict, or intergenerational trauma. While discussing such matters can provide a few moments of insight for practitioners, it is not a replacement for lived experience, and also may cause pain and damage relationships (Akama et al., 2019). In spite of the requirements or perceived needs of a project or research, practitioners may never be able to fully 'empathise'. From a perspective that foregrounds intimacy, access to knowledge requires access to the knower (Kasulis, 2002); some understandings will not be possible, as we might not get invited to partake in certain relationships, or it might be wise and respectful for us not to intrude.

### 10.4.4 Structural constraints to relational DSI practice

Most practitioners involved in this research do not have a design background, and yet practise design in a social innovation context in ways that often deviate from conventional design thinking methods. Shifting the focus away from the dominant design discourse, it is possible to see the design process in other knowledge practices (Escobar, 2017, p. 214), as there are many designs and innovations that are "named and practised in 'other ways', yet they precede by far everything that professions, with their presumptuousness, pretend to appropriate" (Salazar & Borrero, 2017, p. 4). Whether design can support social innovation as a relational practice depends on our willingness to expand our understanding of what design means, and on our readiness to accept, support, and hold space for the emergence of a new culture of design that is grounded in relationality – in spite of the perceived threat to the roles and the identity we commonly associate with being a designer. What needs to be reimagined is not so much the designer's profession – with its set of roles, tasks, and skills – as the designer's ontology (Escobar, 2017; St John & Akama, 2022; Winograd & Flores, 1986).

Major forces often get in the way of this collective learning process. Firstly, design business – including that operating in the social innovation space – quickly absorbs practices from other places and contexts and turns them into trends, reducing the force of the ideas behind them (Light, 2018a, p. 149). Abdulla (in Schultz et al., 2018) sarcastically envisions a "Decolonising Design Toolkit" providing a series of steps to achieve design decolonisation; similarly, the idea of a 'Relational Design Toolkit' would be antithetical to the aims of this research.

Secondly, design education institutions often fail to integrate reflections on design ontology (i.e., on what design is and does) in the larger academic discourse, relegating key issues to single, often short-lived modules or to higher levels of specialisation. This way, basic assumptions on the nature and purpose of design go unscathed at the undergraduate level. Among tendencies to depoliticise DSI and co-opt ideas from the 'margins', it might be challenging for designers to "continually renew the will to be communal" (Escobar, 2017, p. 216).

Thirdly, many practitioners have mentioned the difficulties of sustaining relationships in DSI initiatives. This can be due to time or economic constraints: for example, private consultancies have to balance between pro bono and for-profit work, and many organisations rely on grants that are time-bound and dependent on results. Even initiatives operating within government can be precarious:

> *"[L]ocal government has repeatedly failed communities [...] Like, 'we'll go in and we'll do a new thing, and then it doesn't work, and we get annoyed, so we take it away'. Or, 'we'll try an effort, but it's not sustained, and we run out of money' [...] So there's layers of distrust that can inform those communities. [...] What does an enabling government look like? How do you hold as long as it takes for that trust to reform [and to be] delivered on? That's really long term and it's not how organizations are set up". (Lucy)*

Anne, whose organisations funds projects, specified that some of the expectations usually associated with DSI (see § 10.2.1) do not apply to them because, being a private foundation, they do not need to account to their shareholders through a traditional impact measurement approach:

> *"[For] the EU or a corporate foundation, it is much more compelling to say 'we worked with 10,000 kids' than it is to say 'We have supported the collaboration between six non profits' or, 'We've curated a learning journey between four non profits'. That stuff is less tangible but it's really, really vital". (Anne)*

Personally, I have experienced the difficulty of having to fit within a specific project timeframe, pushing for project advancement and creating tensions in relationships, or imposing what Dario and I called an "obligation to design".

Finally, I should note that the difficulties that practitioners and communities encounter when doing design as a relational practice cannot be attributed exclusively to cultural predispositions. Adopting a culturalist perspective would mean to isolate certain aspects of DSI, not considering their correlation with the conditions of material reality that characterise the modern, colonial, capitalist world system since the rise of Western modernity and through globalisation and neoliberalism. With the Framework for Relational Literacy, I have tried to make certain elements pertaining to collective, cultural imagination – those connected to relationships in DSI – more visible, but the aim of this research is not just to provide a scaffold for designers' *contemplative* work: it aims to support practice in the awareness that our cultural imaginary has underpinnings in real material conditions. People from the Global South, Indigenous people, and disenfranchised communities are the most affected, as their collective design efforts take place mostly in antagonistic contexts, where daily pressures and outright (violent) repression try to undermine them (Escobar, 2017, p. 167). I could not demand that DSI practice and research be open to a variety of perspectives without acknowledging the lived experience of struggle that people who carry these perspectives face every day. Relational DSI practices should be considered within their historical context, given that the processes ignited by modernity and coloniality are still in force today, and still influence the relationships and contexts where social innovation takes place, the dominant design approaches to them, and how efforts 'from the margins' are received, resisted, or erased.

## 10.5 Final recommendations for relational practice

Having examined the uses for the Framework for Relational Practice and the challenges and constraints that may surface for practitioners, this section presents some reflections on how these challenges may be attended to, situating them in a landscape of propositions and insights from scholars and practitioners in different contexts.

### 10.5.1 Foregrounding relationships in reporting

This research has questioned the dominance of a market-focused paradigm in design, and of a view of innovation that is rooted in technology and tools even when it is meant to be 'social'. Yet, understandings of social impact are still tied to practices of reporting that highlight economic outcomes and prioritise demonstrating predetermined social impacts. Contexts of innovation – with their discontinuities, non-linear changes, and their fast, slow, and unforeseeable variables (Westley & Antadze, 2010) – are reduced to singular narratives.

In our final report for *Building belonging in schools,* Dario and I found it challenging to tell a coherent story of a process that inevitably (also because of the Covid-19 pandemic) had an intermittent pattern. The conclusive section of our report was dedicated to the importance of relationships not just for the sake of project outcomes, but for the support, solidarity and care that developed between us and with the teachers. While we were bound by the project to demonstrate that certain social impacts were achieved in specific ways, we had to acknowledge that we had witnessed different kinds of impact too. I noticed a kind of hesitation as we wrote the report: our impressions were deeply personal, imbued by our experience of the difficulties brought by the pandemic, and thus did not sound objective and verifiable as a project report is normally expected to be. We were not fabricating facts, yet I felt a similar type of discomfort in writing the report to when, at the Community Centre, I was asked to "leave the emotions at the door" (see § 7.3.1) – like feelings, relationships and personal experiences were somehow inappropriate to incorporate in the report. In fulfilling my obligation to make an 'objective' account of the project, I felt simultaneously a desire and resistance towards reporting on personal, heartfelt experiences of relating.

This thesis has shown that interpersonal dynamics connected to reciprocity, mutuality, and shared relational identities are key in DSI processes. Literature on relationships in DSI has not focused primarily on detailed descriptions of relational dynamics: the relationships that are said to be the precondition and the result of social innovation are often looked at from a larger perspective – such as in Manzini's notion of "collaborative organisations" (2015); generic discourse on 'social capital' that would allow groups to succeed in social innovation initiatives (Putnam, 1993); or Granovetter's social network analysis of 'strong' and 'weak' ties (1973). This thesis suggests that relationships ought to be evaluated more precisely, and greater transparency and awareness should be used in reporting values, positionality, and reflexivity of practitioners and researchers as they build relationships and shape projects and initiatives with participants. Of course, complete transparency can never be claimed; Clarke et al. (2016, p. 523) have noted that "situatedness is never, in effect, completely knowable and reportable [...] researchers are always working with a shifting self". Yet, through dialogue and collective reflection, complexity can be partially recognised and collaboratively understood. The challenge that this research invites to take on is reporting on relationality without reducing it to a performance of the role of the designer or using the participants' stories as a springboard for the designer's creativity – but instead giving legitimacy to relationships and centring the complex and layered conditions that shape how people, designers included, are embarking on change (Akama & Yee, 2016).

### 10.5.2 Treading lightly into contextual power relations

As discussed in § 8.3, mutual learning is a recurring element for practitioners and, in participatory design, it has been discussed as a way to equalise power relationships (Kensing & Greenbaum, 2012, p. 21). However, there are numerous accounts of participatory design being used to or having the inadvertent effect of muting conflict and dissent, and concealing or 'solving' contingent asymmetries of power, when asymmetries persist at larger scales (Pierri, 2018).

A closer look at power dynamics in DSI revealed that power contributes to shaping all sorts of relationships. Cultural, deeply contextual, internalised, and institutionalised power dynamics, often symbolised and unspoken, permeate our relationships in any design context. Fluidly adapting and attending to contingent situations, rather than treating power imbalances and hierarchy as a simple ‘problem’ that awaits a ‘design solution’, might be a more desirable approach to DSI. The concerns surrounding authenticity I experienced in the Practice Group (see § 9.3.6) point to a perceived role of facilitators (with their skills, their tools and their power) to monitor and regulate dissent; but participation in DSI processes – with the risks of reciprocity, the awkwardness of building mutuality, and the continuous questioning of shared identities – cannot happen if designers interpret conflict and dissent as a generic issue that they sit outside of, rather than an inevitable contingency of design.

While power relations can be transformed in DSI, design’s responsibility should not be to flatten hierarchies, but to engage in critical understanding of different aspects of power: how it is configured, how it changes and flows in a specific setting, how it influences relationships and projects, and how interpersonal dynamics intersect and are affected by larger dynamics of oppression and social exclusion. Considering these elements, it is advisable to tread lightly, in the awareness that a relational approach to DSI is not synonymous with an ethical one. Exploring relational nuances might lead to intrusion in the participants’ lives; reflecting on the ethical and political implications of DSI is therefore crucial not just for the sake of project outcomes, but for the wellbeing and the harmony of the people and the communities involved. Moreover, ethical concerns should include a consideration of the wellbeing of design practitioners: a relational approach implies an opening to the other where professional boundaries are not easy to trace. Extricating oneself from the relational entanglements in a specific context might not be possible without challenging bonds that might have been developed over time with significant emotional involvement. One practitioner compared a relational approach to DSI with social work, to the point that she wondered whether her team needed supervision (see § 7.3); as the profession’s boundary blurs and design blends with other practices, it is important to consider its inherent limitations and to explore ways in which design practitioners can build emotional resilience and offer each other mutual support.

### 10.5.3 Seeking and embracing plurality

The final reflection in this thesis pertains to how ‘design’ and ‘social innovation’ are conceived and reproduced. This research has demonstrated that when the integrity orientation (Kasulis, 2002) is dominant in design – evidenced by a foregrounding of methods, tools, techniques, replicable and scalable models – DSI and DSI practitioners are described as rational, impersonal, and guided by external principles. Certainly, this approach is present in the practitioners who participated in this research, in my practice and in that of my colleagues and collaborators. Yet, this research has disclosed dimensions that escape straightforward organisation in a method, model or set of guidelines: DSI emerges from intimate relationships that are rooted in contexts and places, and can transform them and the people involved, including practitioners.

Such understanding means that predefinitions of what ‘design’ or ‘social innovation’ are need questioning; that for the DSI field to mature, singular narratives ought to be challenged not in the attempt to destroy them or dilute them, but to enrich and nuance them. This research therefore calls for a reinforcement of our ability to respect and embrace a plurality of ways of knowing and doing design, recognising practices beyond Europe and the US and the depth and nuance they bring to the notion of relationality in DSI. Considering an intimate (Kasulis, 2002) approach to DSI might bring messiness and uncertainty with regards to the scope of design; rather than seeing its transformation as a risk, we would be better off considering it a radical opportunity for design practice and research to serve more meaningful and urgent purposes.

## 10.6 Summary of Chapter 10

This chapter has looked at the Framework for Relational Literacy from a wider angle, clarifying that the Framework can be used as a scaffold for reflective, relational practice in DSI. Rather than being a model to follow or a tool to use, it is an example of how individual and collaborative reflection can be conducted and of the type of stories and practices that can emerge or can be constructed from them.

Describing and reflecting on specific relational dynamics has surfaced different challenges and constraints for relational practice: how a certain culture of reporting shapes how DSI is perceived and imagined; the different ways in which politics and power are perceived in DSI; the difficulties of dealing with sensitive issues without disrupting relationships; and structural constraints to relational practices of DSI.

Chapter 10 ends with some recommendations for relational practice in DSI. Challenging the dominant view of DSI begins with telling different stories about it – designers can start by foregrounding relationships in their reporting. Building a more nuanced understanding of power and politics in DSI is also advisable. We should tread lightly in design contexts, aiming to understand, rather than disrupt, existing power arrangements: the wellbeing and harmony of the people and communities involved, designers included, should be preserved. Finally, we should continue to expand and question our understanding of ‘design’ and ‘social innovation’, going beyond perspectives rooted in integrity to consider intimate definitions of and approaches to DSI. The uncertainty that this may bring should be embraced and explored; it can be the heart of our research and change-making practice.

*Table 10.1 Summary of challenges and recommendations.*

| Challenges and constraints | Reflections and recommendations |
|---|---|
| Certain expectations are associated with DSI because of the way it is commonly reported on | Report on the relational aspects of DSI work, describing their importance and their nuances |
| There are specific and contextual power relations between individuals and groups which may resist univocal, Western interpretations | Aim to understand the contextual politics and whether and how power flows and influences interactions and decision-making |
| Exploring relational nuances might lead to intrude in the participants' lives in ways that damage relationships | Tread lightly when exploring the nuances of relationships – not just for the sake of project outcomes, but for the wellbeing and harmony of the people involved, designers included |
| There are structural constraints to relational approaches to DSI. To live in a modern, colonial, capitalist hegemony cannot be disarticulated from specific understandings of 'design' and 'social innovation' | Reinforce our ability to respect and embrace a plurality of ways of knowing and doing design, including when this plurality brings messiness and uncertainty with regards to what design is and does |

# Chapter 11. Conclusions

This thesis provides new insights into how designing social innovation is practised when relationships and relationality are foregrounded. It addresses two major issues hindering the development of knowledge in the DSI field. Firstly, academic discourse on designing social innovation is dominated by understandings, tools and approaches grounded in integrity that promote scalability, replicability, and transferability to very different situations over intimacy-based, contextual design practice. Secondly, discourse on relationality in DSI takes a perspective on social relations that is often broad and located on a network or organisational level. While this is not necessarily an issue, it does not offer much ground to reflect on the shifting position of the designer as situated in a specific context, surrounded by people tied by particular relationships.

The research contributes to discourse from a practice-based perspective. It is centred on my practice in three different contexts (§ 4.2), documented through diary entries and collaborative reflections with colleagues and collaborators and informed by interviews and reflections with twelve practitioners working in the Asia Pacific region (§ 4.3). During semi-structured interviews, practitioners elaborated on their experience of building relationships in their DSI practice. The interplay between a thematic analysis of their interviews (described in § 5.4) and the construction of a narrative of personal practice, with the influence of Kasulis's *Intimacy or Integrity* framework (2002), led to the identification of three main themes that build a nuanced account of specific relational dynamics in DSI. I have named the outcome of this research 'Framework for Relational Literacy' (discussed in Chapters 6-9); a discussion of the themes led to the formulation of broad challenges to relational DSI practice and the articulation of three recommendations for practitioners.

## 11.1 Revisiting the aims and objectives

The aim of this research was to investigate how relationships and relationality are construed in DSI. Conceptualising DSI with a social, relational, and communal core as an emerging field of study (at least in Western academic discourse), it pursued the goal to contribute to the redefinition of the designer's position amidst a variety of interpersonal dynamics that are deeply contextual. The contexts of practice varied significantly: one in a formal engagement with education institutions; one in a volunteer role for a local community centre; one as a member of a peer group reflecting on and practising solidarity and mutual support. Similarly, the practitioners in Asia Pacific involved through interviews and field visits reflect the breadth and complexity of social innovation practice.

*Table 11.1 Restating the research questions and objectives*

| Research questions | Research objectives |
|---|---|
| • How are relationships and relationality considered in social innovation?<br>• How are they defined, described, and theorised?<br>• How does a design approach enable specific aspects of relationality to surface?<br>• How do we develop a design approach that foregrounds relationality? | • Nuance definitions of ‘foregrounding relationships’ and ‘relational practice’ in designing social innovation<br>• Identify challenges, limitations, constraints to relational DSI practice<br>• Examine specific relational dynamics in DSI<br>• Investigate how a design approach enables specific aspects of relationality to surface<br>• Discuss how a design approach that foregrounds relationality can be developed |

To offer a summary of this thesis’ response to the research questions in Table 11.1, relationships and relationality are recognised as key to social innovation. However, the majority of research focuses on their broader aspects, such as social networks, social capital, or relational dynamics at the organisational level. The interpersonal, affective, and situated dimensions of relationships are often overlooked. Disciplines such as Relationship Science and Leader-Member Exchange (see § 2.3) have identified interpersonal, dyadic relationships as the key components of groups and social networks; mutuality, reciprocity, trust, role-taking and relational identity, among others, are considered key attributes of relationships. Relationship development is commonly described as a linear progression from a ‘low quality’, instrumental relationship to a ‘high quality’ one, where the relationship is no longer considered a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

In designing social innovation, the formation of relationships is regarded as a phenomenon within the agency and responsibility of professional designers; however, as design becomes increasingly participatory and collaborative, the centrality of the designer’s role in DSI processes is in question. Similarly, some scholars and practitioners have questioned the appropriateness of conventional design thinking methods and tools to deal with the contextuality, unpredictability, and affective dimension of relationships.

Observing design approaches through Kasulis’s (2002) *Intimacy or Integrity* lens, it is possible to identify a dominant paradigm of design that configures practice as a problem solving activity, focused on the production of replicable and scalable design solutions through standardised methods. This paradigm reflects in common discourse on relationships in DSI; relational bonds are often valued for how ‘useful’ they are to the attainment of project goals and objectives; roles and responsibilities are clearly distributed and individual identities are protected. Other paradigms of design, which stem from an intimacy orientation, foreground the aspects of relationality that this thesis concerns itself with: those that are not instrumental or functional, but responsive to contextual specificity and grounded in affect, intuition, care, and conviviality.

So, how might we develop an approach to DSI that foregrounds this type of relationality? This thesis proposes that questioning our beliefs and assumptions about design theory and practice and welcoming understandings from a variety of contexts and cultures can support designers in developing a relational practice. This requires readying ourselves to design’s ontological shifts and cultivating self-awareness alongside flexibility and openness. The Framework for Relational Literacy is an account of such a process and reveals tensions between models that are assumed as ‘good standard’ and the reality of operating within the ever-changing context of specific projects. Elaborating on the three themes presented in the Framework led to the identification of specific relational dynamics and barriers to relational DSI practice and to the formulation of recommendations for designers.

Interviews, dialogical reflections, and individual reflections all played a role in addressing the five research objectives listed below.

1. **Nuance definitions of 'foregrounding relationships' and 'relational practice' in designing social innovation**

By elaborating on day-to-day activities and on their values, interests, and approach to DSI, respondents contributed to the construction of a detailed and nuanced account of relational practice. Extensively discussing relationships with my colleagues and collaborators led to a co-construction of our perception of the role and value of foregrounding relationships in DSI.

2. **Identify challenges, limitations, constraints to relational DSI practice**

Collaborative reflection provided insight into the limitations and constraints to practising relationally. Many issues pertain to the feasibility and sustainability of a relational approach in a system dominated by integrity that does not sufficiently value contextual, situated relationships.

3. **Examine specific relational dynamics in DSI**

Dialogue with practitioners and colleagues led to the identification and description of particular relational dynamics in DSI (building a system of reciprocity; establishing and maintaining mutuality; building a shared relational identity). Their intricacies and details were argued about from different perspectives, considering what aspects of design and relationality may be considered central or peripheral depending on context.

4. **Investigate how a design approach enables specific aspects of relationality to surface**

Reflective practice, experimentation, and dialogical reflection with colleagues and collaborators, informed by interviews with practitioners in the Asia Pacific region, led to the following conclusion: design enables specific aspects of relationality to surface and suppresses others, but specific aspects of relationality – those of intimate, intricate, and situated relationships – also enable the emergence of ways of understanding and doing design. These two positions coexist, and the research has considered the tensions between them.

5. **Discuss how a design approach that foregrounds relationality can be developed**

Reflective practice and dialogical reflection were essential in delineating a relational approach to designing social innovation as inevitably situated, deeply personal and communal. Attempts to foreground relationships in DSI led to tensions and challenges, but also to pleasure and enjoyment of design work with colleagues, collaborators, and community members.

## 11.2 Summary of findings

The Framework for Relational Literacy is a process of reflection grounded in practice and in dialogue with colleagues and collaborators. It is intended to build a nuanced account of relationship building in DSI and to account for a process of questioning what beliefs, ideas and models designers often take for granted when they operate in the social innovation space. It elaborates on three key themes, summarised below.

**Building a system of reciprocity (Chapter 7)**

- Acts of generosity performed without expecting a direct, material return support the creation of partnerships characterised by intentional and stable collaboration.
- The reciprocity is ‘open’ in that the acts of generosity are difficult to precisely quantify and repay in full. A system of reciprocity is thus a seemingly endless exchange (often asymmetrical) of favours, kindness, and help.
- Offerings can be tangible or intangible: money, time, learning opportunities, care, connections, and models of desired behaviour can all be part of the system of reciprocity.
- Some offerings may be ambiguous and hard to interpret for those involved in the relationship; they may have different levels of explicitness; they may even be undecipherable to an external observer. Only participation in the relationship over time can clarify the meaning of certain acts of generosity.

- Participating in a system of reciprocity requires a willingness to take some risks, such as losing time or money, being hurt, being misunderstood, or creating a relationship where it is hard to set boundaries. Despite the risks, building a system of reciprocity proves beneficial to collaboration.

**Establishing and maintaining mutuality (Chapter 8)**

- 'Mutuality' refers to a connection with or understanding of another that facilitates a dynamic process of exchange. In mutuality, parties agree about the nature of their relationship and its specific terms.
- This agreement is not static but dynamic. It is an ever-evolving, subtle, but systematic process of pursuit and gradual self-disclosure.
- Mutuality is built and maintained in more or less explicit ways: through open negotiation of needs and priorities, or through indirect conversations based on intimation and gradual convergence.
- Mutuality permeates different aspects of a relationship: mutual trust and psychological safety, mutual respect and mutual learning, mutual expectations connected to role-taking.
- What brings together the elements listed above is the need for people to feel safe and secure in their bond. Since relationships are continuously evolving, mutuality is sought and established repeatedly.

**Building a shared relational identity (Chapter 9)**

- Building a shared relational identity is a process of transformation of self in and through a relationship. Parties in a relationship can build a shared sense of 'we' that integrates individual, inter-personal and collective levels of self.
- Identity is always socially situated in a specific cultural and relational context. Interpersonal relationships in a specific context can cause identity to shift and adapt.
- The instrumental conception of relationships as 'useful' to DSI projects is partial and incomplete: DSI projects and initiatives provide a contextual boundary that encourages continued interaction. Context is active, dynamic, and entangled

with the identities of the people involved, not just a passive element of or backdrop to design activity.

- Identity shifts are often implicit or hard to identify. They can however be observed in certain dynamics. One of them is the interplay between the preservation of individuality and the cultivation of reciprocal attunement.
- Foregrounding reciprocal attunement in DSI implies focusing on collective contribution; preserving the overlap between self and other; cultivating presence and acceptance of uncertainty; valuing internal, situated knowledge.
- Foregrounding individuality in DSI involves emphasising individual skills (including social skills) and achievements; focusing on personal responsibility, fairness and effectiveness; valuing external, verifiable, absolute knowledge.
- While an emphasis on reciprocal attunement is more common in intimacy cultural orientations and individuality is more frequently found in integrity cultural orientations, individuality and attunement are present even in cultural contexts that do not support them, which can lead to relational tensions and nuances.
- Individuality and attunement are not monolithic and have significant overlaps. Collaborative reflection with practitioners surfaced questions, concerns and dilemmas connected with these tensions and overlaps. Reflecting on the ambivalence between individuality and attunement can support designers in understanding shifts in their own identity and self-perception as they navigate relationships in DSI.

**Scaffolding reflective, relational practice in DSI (Chapter 11)**

The Framework for Relational Literacy and its themes are not meant as a replicable model, but as an account of situated, collaborative meaning-making that configures relational practice in DSI as a process of learning and adaptation through interaction in context. Yet, current and dominant practices of design pose some barriers to relational practice:

- A tradition of reporting that prioritises replicability, scalability, modelling, methods, and tools over situated participatory practice, ‘sanitising’ the experience of design for readers and replicating universalistic approaches.
- A monolithic, rigid understanding of structures of power and status as negative and in need to be dismantled, when hierarchy is considerably nuanced and affects not only communities and organisations design practitioners work with, but also design teams and the relationships practitioners engage in.
- An extractive approach that encourages designers and researchers to probe and interact ignoring their positioning in context and how it contributes to shape and transform relationships with participants.
- The presence of systemic, institutional barriers to relational practice that allow the appropriation, repression, and erasure of other ways of doing design by dominant educational, economic, and political discourse and practice.

The insights from the Framework for Relational Literacy and reflections on constraints to relational practice resulted in the formulation of three recommendations for designers:

1. Foregrounding relationships in reporting, recognising both the importance and the limitations of accounting for the practitioners’ positionality and situatedness in a design context.
2. Treading lightly into contextual power relations, considering the (unexpected, unpredicted) consequences of altering existing power dynamics and putting the wellbeing of all people participating, designers included, before design outcomes.
3. Seeking an embracing plurality, questioning predefinitions of what ‘design’ and ‘social innovation’ mean and welcoming uncertainty as an opportunity to move beyond integrity-based, normative structures and practices into intimate ways of designing that are tied to place, to specific people, to worldviews and ways of life.

## 11.3 Contribution to knowledge

The reflections and insights shared by and developed with the participants in this research provide a basis for an exploration of how designing social innovation can be practised foregrounding relationships and relationality. A critical analysis of DSI discourse has identified the limitations of the dominant, integrity-based approach that centres design processes on the figure of the designer, on their skills and abilities, on methods and tools.

The research findings depict designing social innovation as more nuanced and complex than it is often made out to be. Practitioners in this field are diverse and engage in a variety of activities, yet all weave relationships and contribute to shaping social innovation. While design discipline has focused on how to develop innovative and unique design-centric solutions and on how to formalise and institutionalise them, this research has shown that intimate ways of relating are at the heart of social innovation, and that design projects and initiatives can provide a contextual boundary within which relationships can be experimented with and transformed.

The main contribution of this research to DSI theory and practice is the concept of ‘relational literacy’ as an ongoing activity of building the language and developing the concepts to identify and describe relational dynamics at play in DSI. Through the Framework, relational literacy is presented not as a fixed set of skills, but as an ongoing, contextual practice of collaborative sensemaking. Perhaps, the complex issues that social innovation initiatives aim to ‘solve’ would be better addressed by shifting our focus from design methods and tactics to relational literacy. This requires taking into account that the affective, feeling-sensing dimension of relationships might be hard to describe, and that when DSI is approached from a plural perspective, some things might be ‘lost in translation’, or experiences might be incommensurable.

Another key contribution of this study is the conceptualisation of social innovation as relational transformation. What we refer to as ‘social innovation’ is, in fact, an ongoing transformation of relational ties, the creation of new ones, the development of new individual and collective identities as power changes and shifts. Social innovation does not just begin with a set of relationships and result in a reconfigured one: it *is* the continuous process of reconfiguration of, and within, a specific context. Contextual nuances of relational ties and their political dimension should be engaged with not just because they have an impact on the solidity and sustainability of design initiatives, but because they *are* the shifting relationships that constitute the essence of social innovation. A navel-gazing approach to design concerned with what designers represent in the DSI process would better be replaced by a concern with what designers can do to understand, build, maintain and support respectful, reciprocal relationships.

The following insights therefore constitute the contribution of knowledge of this thesis to the field of designing social innovation:

- Relational transformation is at the heart of social innovation and often outlasts the more tangible outcomes of DSI initiatives. Its complexity should be engaged with, understood, and appreciated.
- Relational literacy – the continuous and collaborative practice of establishing concepts and words to detect and characterize relational dynamics – is key to engage with the complexity of relationships in DSI.
- Dominant views of DSI often frame the impact of relationships as hard to pinpoint. However, common reporting priorities and styles contribute to conceal the importance of relationships. DSI practitioners and researchers should focus their reporting on meaningful relationships, situated in the context of the particular community they are working with and accounting for their positionality with honesty – including changes in self as different roles and perspectives are adopted and personal ties are formed. These elements are often considered unimportant or detrimental to research and practice, but they are in fact inevitable and deserve to be critically engaged with and even enjoyed.
- Different cultural orientations grounded in intimacy or integrity (Kasulis, 2002) contribute to shaping people's perception of, and our actions within relational dynamics. There are limitations to approaching relationships and relational literacy by focusing on standardised, external knowledge – the process of building knowledge needs to be engaged with subjectively and contextually.
- The complexity of particular engagements is endless and not always accessible to practitioners. Adopting a respectful, reciprocal approach, and understanding

> how to protect oneself, others, and the harmony of a group or community is essential to practising DSI ethically.

It is time to embrace intimate, relational approaches to DSI: ways of doing design that appeal to an affective core of connectedness and cannot be translated into universal principles, tools, and methods. Acculturating ourselves to both integrity and intimacy approaches, we become able to welcome a stronger plurality. If this poses the risk of a radical, ontological change of ‘design’ or ‘social innovation’, it is a risk worth taking.

## 11.4 Limitations of the study

This study has limitations that may have affected the interpretation of the research and its applicability.

Firstly, considering different perspectives and nuancing our understanding of DSI will never lead to perfect or complete results. Therefore, the engagement with practitioners from different countries in the Asia Pacific region does not aim to represent DSI in the region as a whole – nor do the engagements with DSI initiatives in my locality represent what DSI is like in the Western world or in Italy.

Secondly, while often mentioning the relevance to this research of Indigenous ways of understanding and doing design, this research has not considered them in depth. Although I recognise that an intimacy orientation is often observed in Indigenous approaches to design, I have not had sufficient chance to study them in detail to make further claims.

Finally, because of repeated lockdowns, of social distancing measures and generally barriers to research that occurred since March 2020, as well as ethical restrictions outlined by the university due to the vulnerable nature of many potential participants in this research (e.g., children), the practice-led portion of this study has focused on my relationship with colleagues and collaborators (Dario and Greta) and members of the Practice Group. It remains a limitation of this study that relationships with other stakeholders (e.g., teachers, volunteers) were not considered in depth. It is also appropriate to consider here the potential limitations of virtual communication compared to being in the same space together, although this restriction could not be avoided.

## 11.5 Recommendations for further research

This initial study on relational approaches to DSI has highlighted their importance in this context and raised many questions, pointing to relevant avenues for further research.

Firstly, a focus of further inquiry could be how the Framework for Relational Literacy can contribute to the concept of infrastructuring in participatory design and DSI. Future work could focus on how the Framework is able to highlight the significance of developing relational practices to carry out infrastructuring work specifically, in ways that are meaningful and based on contextual, situated, ongoing interaction with people.

The multiple dimensions of relationships in DSI could be also considered from different perspectives, welcoming knowledge from places and relationships other than the ones considered in this research, and directly engaging with contexts and cultures where an intimacy orientation is most common. In particular, Indigenous perspectives (in various parts of the world) could be explored.

Examining relationships through collaboration with other disciplines and professions would be appropriate to further question the centricity of design to social innovation; focusing on impact evaluation from a relational perspective could shed light on ways to discuss the effectiveness of DSI initiatives without excluding relationships and relationality or relegating them to the margins of the design process.

Finally, this research has focused mainly on my experience in dyadic relationships and small groups, without explicitly analysing their impact on the formation of larger groups; therefore, it may be useful to consider relationships at other scales.

## 11.6 Personal reflection on the research process

As I described in the introduction to this thesis, I wrote the initial research proposal during a work experience in Indonesia in 2017. Working alongside my colleagues in Jakarta, I realised not only that cultivating relationships was fundamental for the projects that we were working on, but also that the approach to relationships was radically different – although I could not describe exactly how or why. From how people introduced themselves, to how they addressed hierarchy, to how they came to an agreement on the next steps to take in a project, everything was unfamiliar to me. The best way I could describe it at the time was a feeling that everyone around me shared a secret that I did not have access to. That was my first glance at intimacy-based relationships, although at the time I did not have the language or the awareness to describe them. I was intrigued and embarked on this research motivated by a desire to make sense of my experience.

A few years later, during one of our meetings, I told my supervisors that what I was learning in this research process had started spilling over in other projects I was involved in, and in many other areas of my life that are not necessarily connected to my design profession. Exploring the role and value of relationships in DSI has widened my perspective not only on the discipline, but also on who I am, and at the same time it has sharpened my focus on the kind of practitioner I want to be. I stepped into this research as an individual looking for the significance of relationships to DSI; I come out of this research with a different perception of myself as inseparable from my relations, as a contextual co-creation, as an entanglement of relationships. When I proposed that this research would 'design me' (see § 3.2.1) I had not yet realised how ontologically transformative this process would be. Despite my 'division of self' into relationships, I do not feel that I have lost my identity, but that I have built a stronger one – just one that is less 'individual'. This research process, and the resulting awareness, has impacted how I approach relationships in DSI and beyond, and has helped me build a practice that I resonate with. For this, I have to thank everyone who has helped me make this thesis possible.

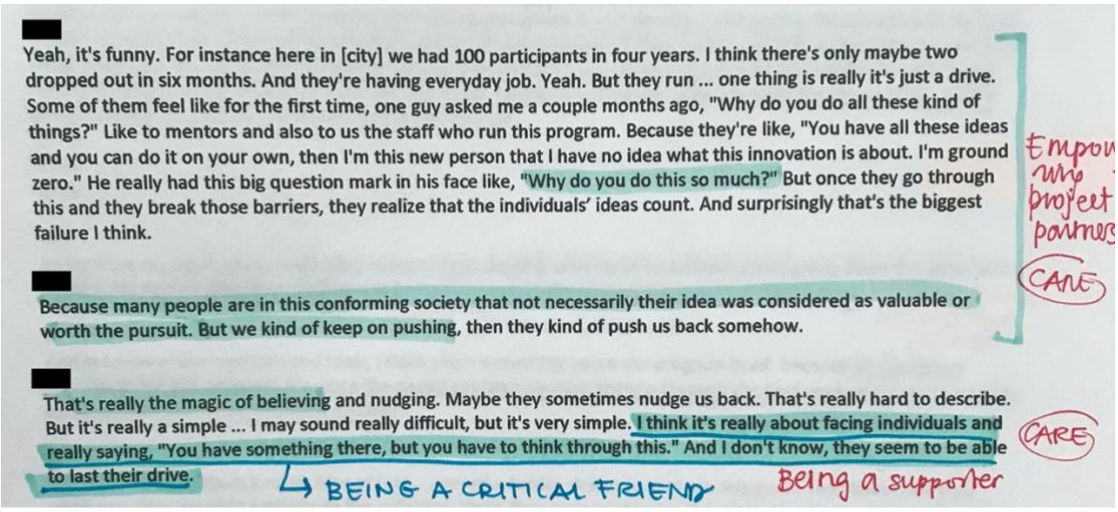
# Appendices

## Appendix A Explanation of the coding process

Appendix A explains the coding process from start to finish using the subtheme ‘offering care’ (in ‘Building a system of reciprocity’) as an example. The coding process was less linear than it is presented here and the construction of each theme and sub-theme did not follow the same exact path. However, what follows is an accurate summary and description of the approach to coding adopted in this thesis. A general description of the coding process is presented in § 5.3.

### First stage coding

I began by reading all interviews, highlighting them, and making notes at the margins. Figure A.1 shows some excerpts of annotated interviews where I had started to outline the ‘offering care’ subtheme (I selected different excerpts from those quoted in § 7.3 that describes the subtheme). At this point, the coding was predominantly semantic (Braun et al., 2019) – sometimes I noted down the practitioners’ specific expressions.



[redacted]

Yeah, it's funny. For instance here in [city] we had 100 participants in four years. I think there's only maybe two dropped out in six months. And they're having everyday job. Yeah. But they run ... one thing is really it's just a drive. Some of them feel like for the first time, one guy asked me a couple months ago, "Why do you do all these kind of things?" Like to mentors and also to us the staff who run this program. Because they're like, "You have all these ideas and you can do it on your own, then I'm this new person that I have no idea what this innovation is about. I'm ground zero." He really had this big question mark in his face like, "Why do you do this so much?" But once they go through this and they break those barriers, they realize that the individuals' ideas count. And surprisingly that's the biggest failure I think.

Empow
project
partners
CARE

[redacted]

Because many people are in this conforming society that not necessarily their idea was considered as valuable or worth the pursuit. But we kind of keep on pushing, then they kind of push us back somehow.

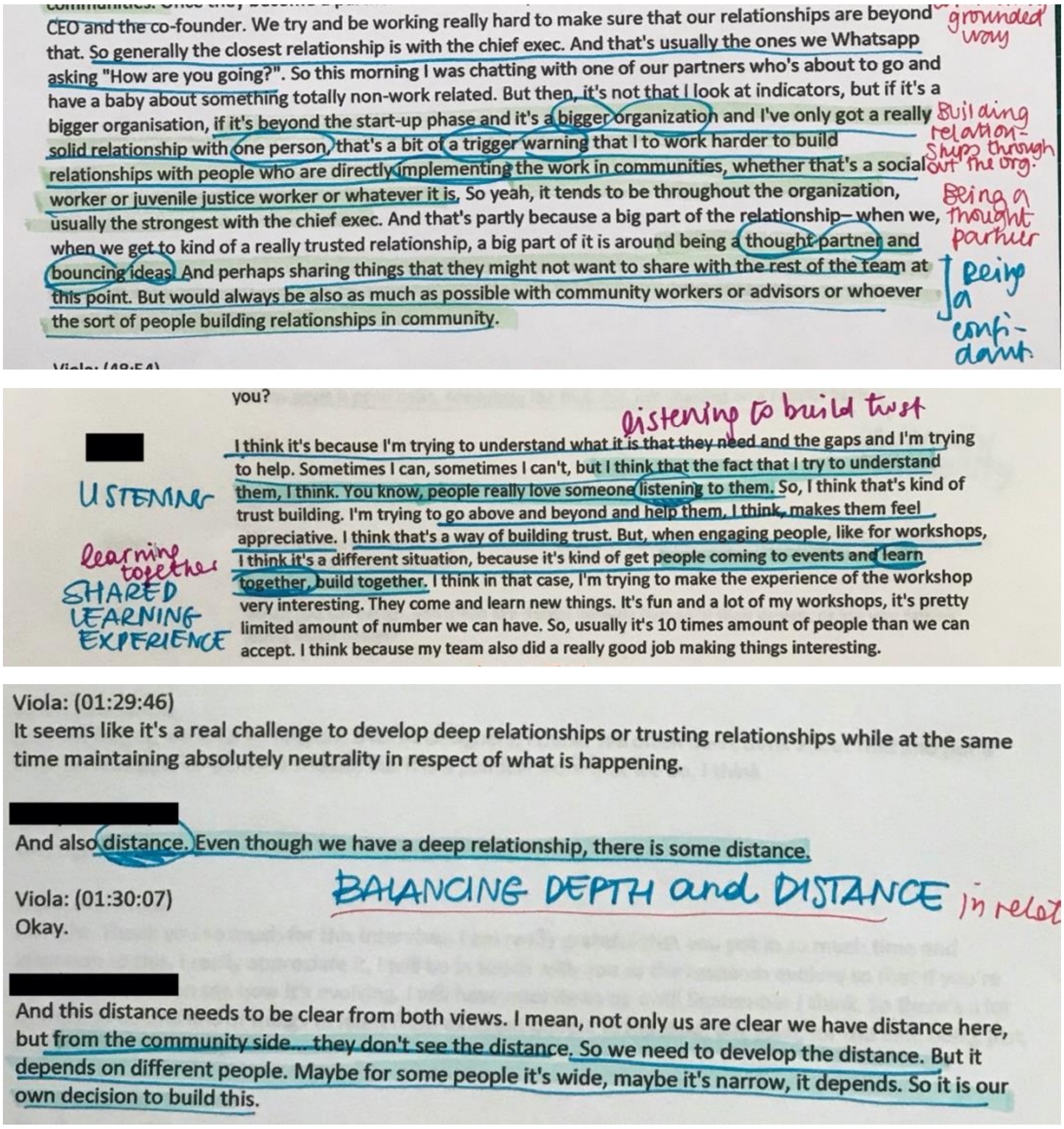
[redacted]

That's really the magic of believing and nudging. Maybe they sometimes nudge us back. That's really hard to describe. But it's really a simple ... I may sound really difficult, but it's very simple. I think it's really about facing individuals and really saying, "You have something there, but you have to think through this." And I don't know, they seem to be able to last their drive.

CARE

BEING A CRITICAL FRIEND

Being a supporter



CEO and the co-founder. We try and be working really hard to make sure that our relationships are beyond that. So generally the closest relationship is with the chief exec. And that's usually the ones we Whatsapp asking "How are you going?". So this morning I was chatting with one of our partners who's about to go and have a baby about something totally non-work related. But then, it's not that I look at indicators, but if it's a bigger organisation, if it's beyond the start-up phase and it's a bigger organization and I've only got a really solid relationship with one person, that's a bit of a trigger warning that I to work harder to build relationships with people who are directly implementing the work in communities, whether that's a social worker or juvenile justice worker or whatever it is. So yeah, it tends to be throughout the organization, usually the strongest with the chief exec. And that's partly because a big part of the relationship– when we, when we get to kind of of a really trusted relationship, a big part of it is around being a thought partner and bouncing ideas. And perhaps sharing things that they might not want to share with the rest of the team at this point. But would always be also as much as possible with community workers or advisors or whoever the sort of people building relationships in community.



you?

[redacted]

I think it's because I'm trying to understand what it is that they need and the gaps and I'm trying to help. Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't, but I think that the fact that I try to understand them, I think. You know, people really love someone listening to them. So, I think that's kind of trust building. I'm trying to go above and beyond and help them, I think, makes them feel appreciative. I think that's a way of building trust. But, when engaging people, like for workshops, I think it's a different situation, because it's kind of get people coming to events and learn together, build together. I think in that case, I'm trying to make the experience of the workshop very interesting. They come and learn new things. It's fun and a lot of my workshops, it's pretty limited amount of number we can have. So, usually it's 10 times amount of people than we can accept. I think because my team also did a really good job making things interesting.



Viola: (01:29:46)
It seems like it's a real challenge to develop deep relationships or trusting relationships while at the same time maintaining absolutely neutrality in respect of what is happening.

[redacted]
And also distance. Even though we have a deep relationship, there is some distance.

Viola: (01:30:07)
Okay.

[redacted]
And this distance needs to be clear from both views. I mean, not only us are clear we have distance here, but from the community side... they don't see the distance. So we need to develop the distance. But it depends on different people. Maybe for some people it's wide, maybe it's narrow, it depends. So it is our own decision to build this.



*Figure A.1 Annotated excerpts of interviews*

### Second stage coding

After reading through the interviews several times, I transferred all codes to sticky notes. These referenced the instances where the code occurred in the interviews with the initials of the practitioners and a page number (redacted in Fig. A.2 for privacy reasons). At this point in the analysis, I was still close to the participants' terminology, so I turned to the literature to refine the codes. I considered codes separately and checked for commonalities and overlaps between them, identifying ways I could group them and rename them more clearly depending on how they described and nuanced specific concepts. For example, encouragement is offered as a form of care and support, but “creating courage” is also a behaviour that can be modelled by taking a risk first (see § 7.5.2), so I tried replacing it with ‘offering encouragement’ or ‘building confidence’ so as not to confuse them. Figure A.2 shows three arrangements of sticky notes around concepts of emotional support, boundaries and consent, and emotional labour.

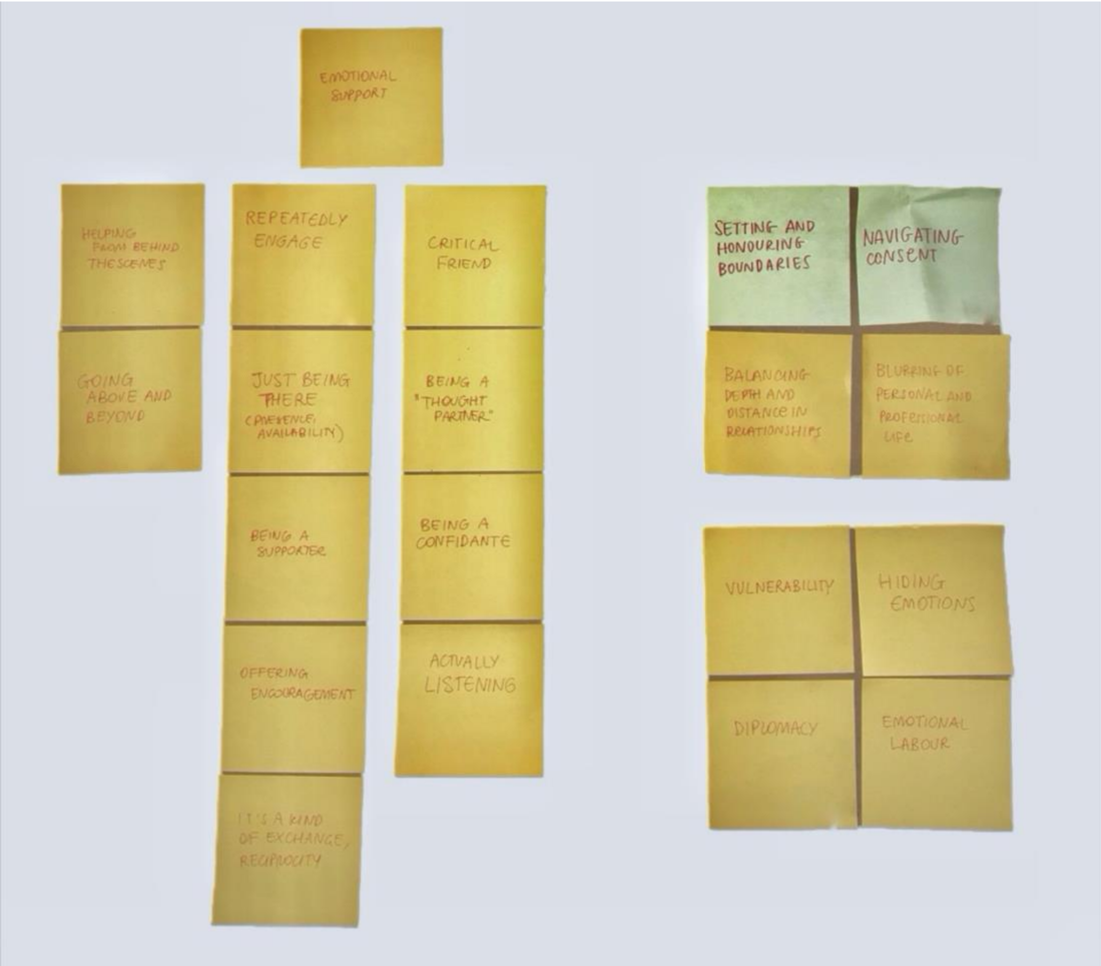



*Figure A.2 Codes on sticky notes organised to describe the concepts of emotional support, boundaries, and emotional labour*

Through this process, I identified a first set of codes which I then transferred to a data analysis software (Nvivo). As described in § 5.3, I only used Nvivo for organising and archiving codes and quotes, not for data analysis; this allowed me to retrieve quotes more easily in the reporting phase.

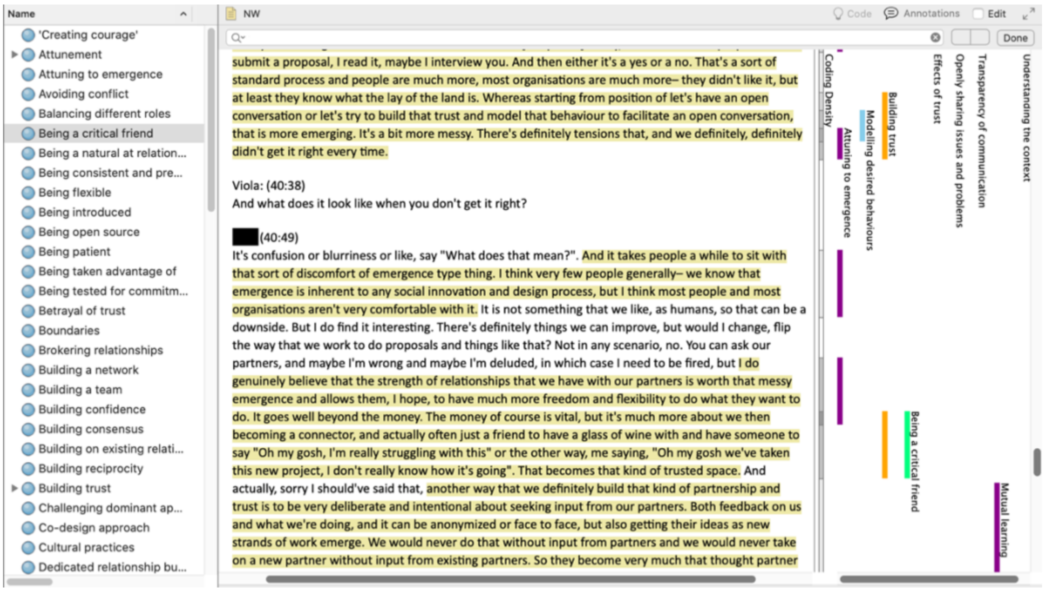



*Figure A.3 Example of coded transcript*

### Construction of the themes and subthemes

To make sense of how themes and subthemes could relate to one another, I printed all codes on cards and used them to construct several thematic maps. I kept rearranging the codes by affinity, so that the ‘word cloud’ in Figure A.4 (captured in one iteration of the mapping process) would tell an overall story or process of relationship building. In this phase ‘reciprocity’ gained strength as a central organising concept (also thanks to an exploration of the concept in the literature), and I rearranged some of the codes related to ‘offering care’ around it (see Fig. A.4).

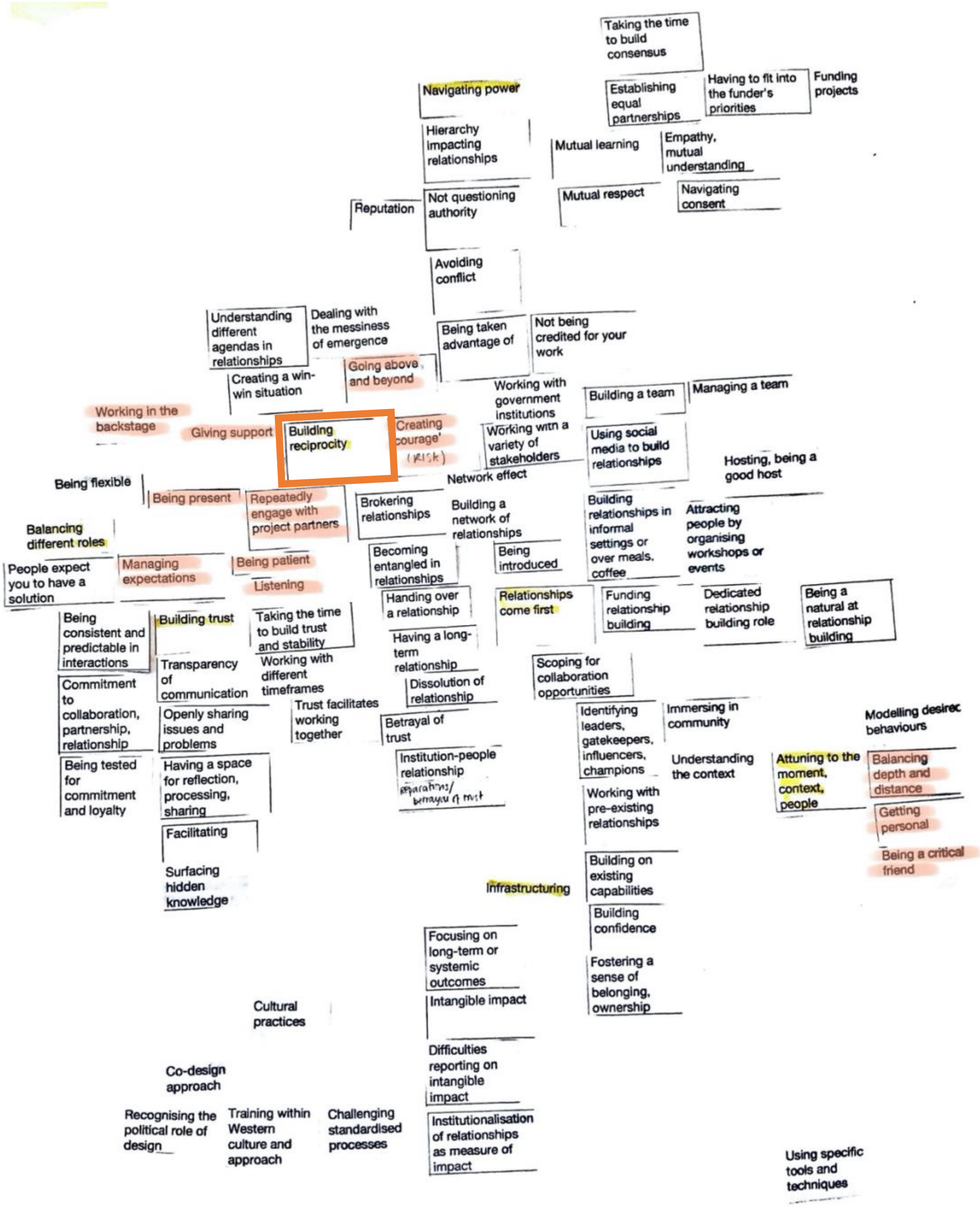



*Figure A.4 Example of thematic map*

In order to explore specific themes, I used the following guiding questions to rearrange the codes:

- What are the characteristics of (positive) relationships in DSI?
- What strategies are used to get there?

- What are the principles or values guiding the strategies?
- What contextual aspects did practitioners have to deal with when using these strategies?
- What actions are performed to carry out the strategies?
- What are the (predicted or unpredicted) outcomes of these actions?

Through several iterations of this mapping exercise (see Fig. A.5, A.6), I arrived at the definition of the three themes, tentatively named 'mutuality', 'reciprocity' and 'shared identity'. In the first map (Fig. A.5), themes are still disaggregated and not clearly defined. I had not yet chosen the expression 'offering care' and still used 'offering support'. In the last map (Fig. A.6), 'offering care' is included as a subtheme, and is associated with a variety of actions such as 'listening', 'building confidence', 'being patient', and setting 'boundaries'. References to the unintended outcomes, or risks, of offering care are also present.

*Figure A.5 First attempt at organising codes to answer specific questions*

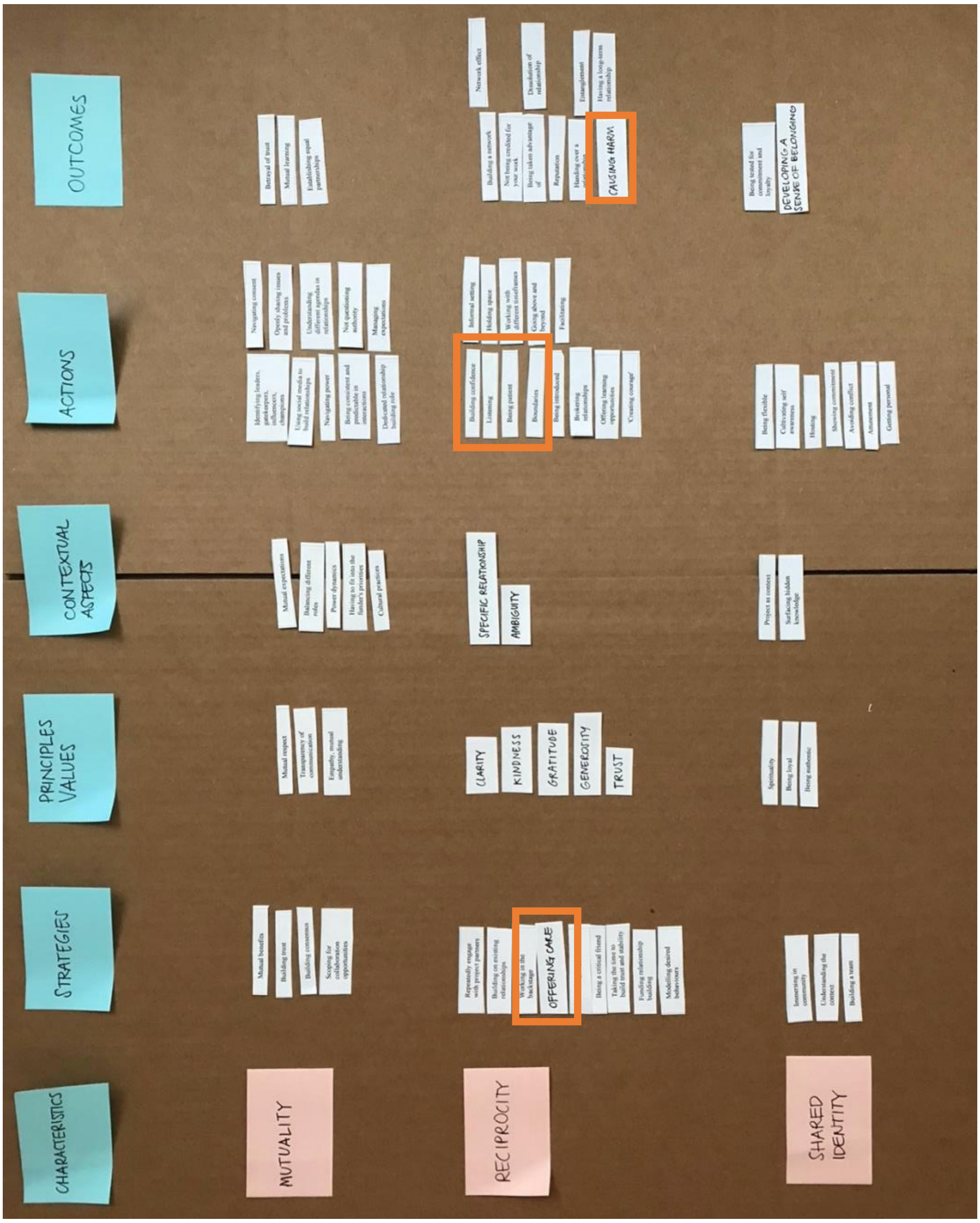



*Figure A.6 Final iteration of the map organising the codes to answer specific questions*

It is important to note that maps in Figure A.5 and A.6 (and the many iterations between them) were produced over a long period of time, during which I engaged in my practice and developed a personal perspective on the themes and subthemes. I also periodically went back to the interviews, re-read them, and created more diagrams to organise concepts. I created a first version of the diagram in Figure A.7 for the presentation of a paper at the Design Research Society conference in August 2020 (Petrella et al., 2020). By December 2020, I had added a third theme (‘Building a shared relational identity’) but I had not yet finalised ‘offering care’ as a subtheme of ‘Building a system of reciprocity’ (see Fig. A.7).

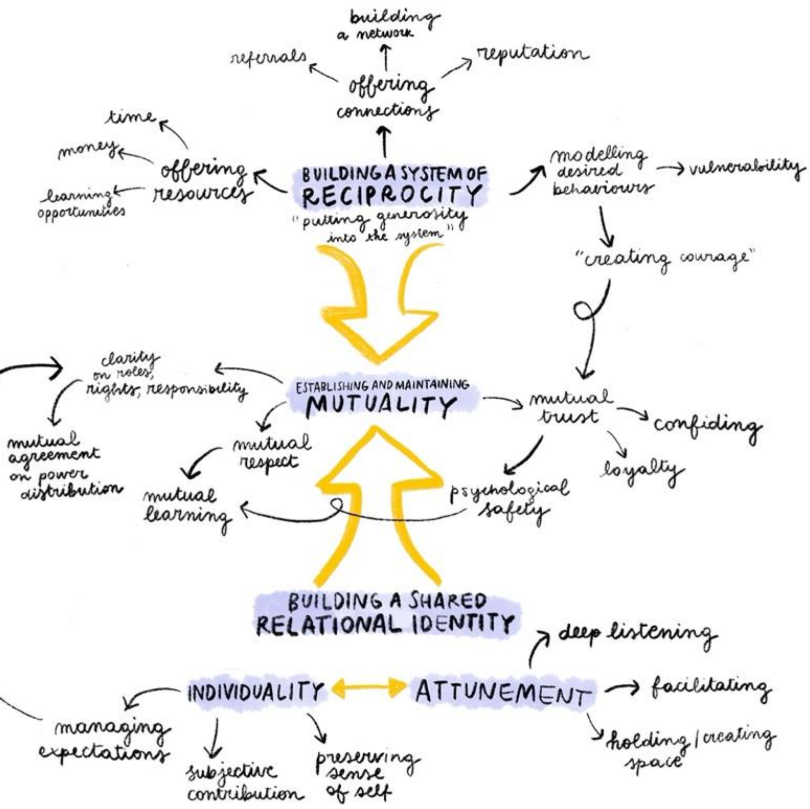



*Figure A.7 A thematic map from December 2020. ‘Offering care’ is not yet referenced as a subtheme of ‘Building a system of reciprocity’*

In my practice, I discussed care extensively with collaborators. For example, with Greta, as I note in the following diary entry from January 2021:

> *“Sometimes I feel like a crutch for people’s problems. Other times, it is nice to be held. […] It’s tiring when the caring load isn’t shared, when I’m the only one holding space, when I need to be held. [Greta] and I cling to each other because we have the same, caring approach. We exchange messages and have calls about how to deal with group dynamics. We mostly give each other emotional support, especially when interactions get tense”.*

The following elaboration of a salient event, written in March 2021, further explores the notion of 'care':

> *"The day after the meeting, I call Greta. I'm not proud of how the meeting went. I didn't know what role to take. One participant was aggressive towards another, and I felt I should simultaneously shut them down and hold space for them to express how they felt. This happens often. I felt responsible for the 'vibe' of the group, being in the role of facilitator, and I resented them for messing with it. In that moment, I wanted to both belong to that space, and have nothing to do with it. I went on a long, clumsy speech about how I was happy with the results we had achieved so far, on how these are uncertain times […] I got defensive… and verbose. So, I call Greta. I look for feedback, I open up. 'I'm not proud of my reaction last night', I say. She listens patiently, we talk about it. 'You're human, Viola, just like everyone else in that room,' she replies, 'I'm sure they will understand. Don't worry too much about it.'"*

In April 2021, I reviewed the Framework for Relational Literacy with colleagues and practitioners. My presentation of the Framework did not contain a reference to 'offering care'. However, in the conversations with Greta and Dario in particular, we discussed care. I referenced my dialogue with Dario on the ambiguity of care in § 7.3.2; in the excerpt below, Greta discusses boundaries to care and how leaving the obligations that came with her role on the Board allowed her to reframe her position in the Community Centre.

> *"The moment I stepped down from the Board [of the Community Centre] […] I realised I gained mental clarity and could keep the confrontation, however high, always grounded in listening. […] Saying [to Board members] 'Enough, that's not how I want to work', stepping down, I realised that, after a while, I could see more clearly how people were opposed to one another, I could see the midpoint […] I don't have to oppose others, I can be the one who tries to find a solution […]. It doesn't mean I'm less involved. But I feel better because I can enjoy it" (Greta)*

Through these reflections, I clarified the concept of 'offering care' enough to qualify it as a subtheme. The thematic map in Figure A.8, which I created to accompany the draft of the Discussion and Interpretation section of this thesis, shows the subtheme 'offering care', with references to emotional labour and boundaries.

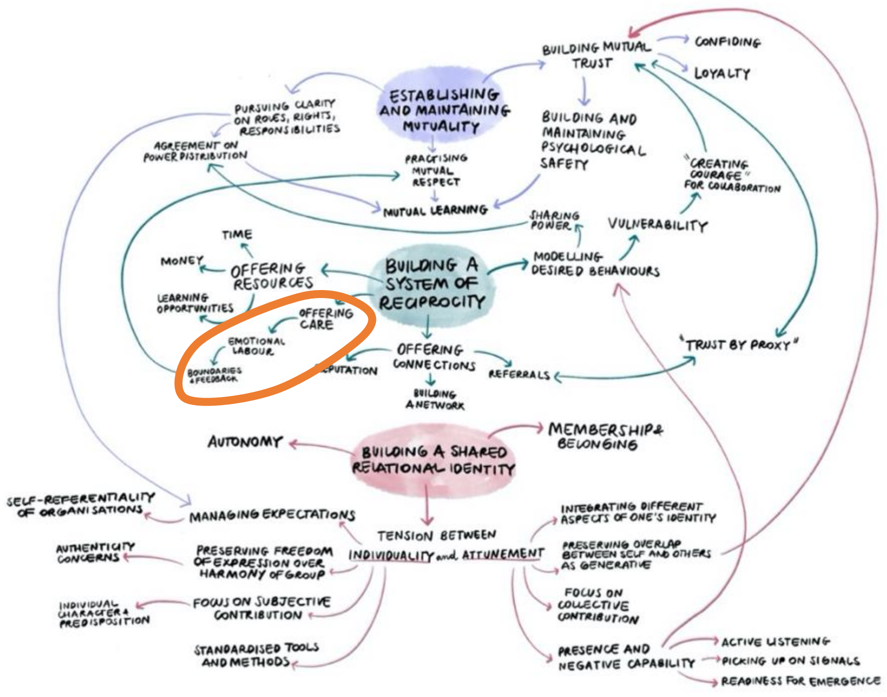



*Figure A.8 A thematic map from September 2021*

More reflections on care connected to role-taking and mutual expectations (see § 8.4) surfaced as I interrogated my role as a designer during the Covid-19 emergency, reconfiguring care not only as a strategy to establish a system of reciprocity, but as part of my shifting role as a designer.

The construction of other themes and subthemes followed a similar process: analysing the interviews, identifying of codes and tentative themes; observing my practice and nuancing the themes through my experience; going back to the interviews and having follow-up conversations to refine and clarify the themes; documenting the process with maps, diagrams, and by cataloguing codes; and producing reports, papers and sections of this thesis to describe the themes and subthemes, organising them in the Framework for Relational Literacy.

## Appendix B Interview guide and consent form

Below are the interview guide and consent form sent to participants in preparation of the first set of interviews.

Participant Information Sheet Version 1.0 // March 2019

### **The Role and Value of Relationships in Design and Social Innovation:** insights from Asia Pacific contexts

Northumbria Ethics Reference: 15837
Principal Investigator: Viola Petrella

My name is Viola Petrella. I am a researcher at Northumbria University in Newcastle. My research topic is relationships in processes of social innovation that involve design. This research includes interviewing practitioners in the social innovation field that use design methods and tools in their work. You should only participate in the study if you want to: not participating will not disadvantage you in any way. Before you decide, I will explain the goals and structure of this research and what your involvement may be.

**What is the purpose of this interview?**

This interview will explore how you build, maintain and manage your relationships with other people involved in a social innovation project, and what kind of strategies, methods or tools you may use for this purpose. If you decide to take part in the research, we will communicate over Skype or another telecommunication application and have a conversation on this topic. I will ask you some questions, and you can disclose as much or as little as you want and feel comfortable.

**What do you mean by "social innovation"?**

Social innovation is a term used to describe new ideas, strategies and organisations that aim to meet social needs in a certain context. The goal of social innovations is to benefit and strengthen civil society. Social innovation refers to the methods used (for example community participation, open source, etcetera) as well as to the results. Examples of social innovation are microcredit, distance learning, community-based planning, or services allowing users to share resources.

**What do you mean by "design methods and tools"?**

Design uses specific methods and tools (such as drawing, mapping, prototyping, iteration, frameworks, etc.) to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for project viability and sustainability. Design can be practised in the context of social innovation to analyse a certain context and find solutions that meet social needs.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, there is no obligation to take part. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please read this information sheet before making a decision whether to participate and ask me if you have any questions.

**What data are you collecting and what will you do with it?**

I am collecting your views, opinions and experiences with building and maintaining relationships in design and social innovation initiatives. At the end of this document, you can find some questions which we will use as a guide for discussion. I might ask some follow up questions to expand on some topics. You do not have to answer all of my questions if you do not want to. If at any time during the interview I ask a question you do not want to answer, please let me know, and we will skip that question or end the interview.

The interview will be recorded, so that I can listen to it again, transcribe it and analyse your opinions, comments and ideas. The audio will be anonymised when I transcribe the recordings, and then the audio file will be destroyed. It will not be possible to identify you as the interviewee.

All data will be stored for three years after the project has ended (in 2021). It will be stored securely in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, the European law on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing and free movement of personal data). The data will only be accessible to the myself as the main researcher in this project for the purpose of analysis.

After I have anonymized all the data, I will only share it with my research project supervisors when needed. A quote taken from the anonymized data may be published in an appropriate journal/textbook or on an appropriate Northumbria University webpage.

**What are possible benefits and risks of taking part?**

There are no direct benefits to you for your participation. However, you may find the conversation of interest as it would enable you to reflect on the role of relationships in your practice. There are no known disadvantages or risks other than the existing risks of everyday.

**What if I change my mind?**

You can withdraw at any given moment during the interview, without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision to not take part, will not affect you in any way and will not harm the relationship between any of the people or institutions involved.

**Who can I contact?**

If you have any question regarding the interview, please contact me at viola.petrella@northumbria.ac.uk. If the interview has harmed you in any way, or you wish to make a complaint, please contact the Northumbria University Research Ethics Director for the Faculty of Design, Sheng-feng Qin, at sheng-feng.qin@northumbria.ac.uk
You can also contact my supervisor Dr. Joyce Yee at joyce.yee@northumbria.ac.uk . At any given moment you have the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office (see https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/). The data controller for this interview is Northumbria University, and its Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dp.officer@northumbria.ac.uk.

Participant Information Sheet Version 1.0 // March 2019

## Introduction

This interview will explore **how you build, maintain, manage, nurture your relationships** with other people involved in a social innovation project, and what kind of strategies, methods or tools you may use for this purpose. We will have a conversation on this topic via Skype, lasting about **55 minutes**. Below you will find some of the questions I will ask you; they are a **guide for discussion**, so I may ask some follow-up questions as we chat. You can disclose as much or as little as you want and feel comfortable. **Honesty is very important** in this conversation; your answers will be completely **anonymised** and original audio files will be deleted after transcription.

## Discussion guide

**To answer these questions, you can think of specific projects you are/were involved with, if that is easier.**

- Can you tell me about your work? How do you describe what you do?

**The following questions are to understand more about the people you work with.**

- In your line of work, who do you usually have to interact with to bring a project forward?
- What kind of day-to-day relationships do you have to nurture as part of your work?

**The following questions are to understand what is most important and challenging about building relationships in your work. We will focus on relationships with external partners, but we might also discuss relationships with colleagues you are working with on a specific project.**

- Do you think relationships are important to the success of your work? Why?
- What's most important when building relationships in your work?
- What do you value in working relationships?
- What's most challenging about building relationships in your work?
- How would you describe a good relationship, from a professional point of view?

**The following questions are to understand your approach to building work relationships. We will focus on relationships with external partners, but we might also discuss relationships with colleagues you are working with on a specific project.**

- How do you build relationships in the work you do?
- Can you tell me about any methods, techniques or tools you use to help you build relationships?
- Do you use different methods with different people?
- Could you give a specific example?
- Has your approach to building relationships changed over time? If so, how?

Consent Form Version 1.0 // March 2019

# **The Role and Value of Relationships in Design and Social Innovation:** insights from Asia Pacific contexts

Northumbria Ethics Reference: 15837
Lead researcher: Viola Petrella

**By signing this form, you agree that:**
(please tick the boxes if you have read and understand the statement)

❑ I have read the 'Information Sheet' and have been given explanation, so that I understand the purpose of the project.

❑ I have been given the chance to ask questions, which have been answered to my satisfaction.

❑ I understand that I can withdraw at any time during the experiment, and this will not affect my treatment or relationship with the research and university.

❑ I am aware that my details will be kept confidential, securely stored and only accessible to the lead researcher.

❑ I agree to take part in this study.

❑ I understand that the collected data will be anonymized, and stored securely in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

**I hereby confirm that I give consent for the following recordings to be made:**

❑ Audio of the remote interview: for the purpose of revisiting these interviews for analysis. I understand that the recordings will be destroyed after transcription.

**Tick or initial the box to indicate your consent to:**

❑ **Clause A:** I understand that other individuals connected to the research (such as the PhD project supervisors) may be exposed to the anonymized transcriptions of the recording(s). My name or other personal information will never be associated with the transcription(s).

❑ **Clause B:** I understand that the anonymized transcription(s) may also be used for teaching/research purposes and may be presented to students/researchers in an educational/research context. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the content.

❑ **Clause C:** I understand that the anoymized transcription(s) may be published in an appropriate journal/textbook or on an appropriate Northumbria University webpage. My name or other personal information will never be associated with the transcription(s). I understand that I have the right to withdraw consent to the use of my anonymized quotes at any time prior to publication.

❑ **Clause D:** I also consent to the retention of this data under the condition that any subsequent use also be restricted to research projects that have gained ethical approval from Northumbria University.

Signature of Participant:

Date:

## Appendix C Example of interview transcript

Below is a full transcript of the first interview with Anne, a practitioner working in Asia Pacific (see § 4.5). Name and personal details have been changed for privacy reasons. Full transcripts of all interviews are available upon request.

---STARTED RECORDING---

Viola:

Tell me about the work you do.

ANNE:

My role within the foundation is that I head up all of our grant making work. My role is to try and understand as much as possible about the communities in which we're working to try to connect as much as possible with existing stakeholders there and to try and build relationships with the stakeholders either that we then may fund or that we collaborate in other ways. That's in a nutshell what my job is. And so kind of relationship building is fundamental to what I do. As I say, I'm not a designer and I'm not a social innovation expert by any means. It's funny that there is now a jargon around this, around relational funding, which is totally what we are. It wasn't that we chose to be a relational funder, it's just that we couldn't think of any other way to do this well. My background is, I've always worked for non-profits. I've worked a bit in social innovation space and I've run a lot of non-profits, I've raised quite a bit of money. I've been generally fairly frustrated I think by how the funding landscape operates. There's been sort of fairly huge big challenges around that. And so when this opportunity came up, it seemed like a good opportunity to try to, given that we are a private foundation and so we can take more risks and do things differently, to try and explore. Is there a better way to do this, particularly in Southeast Asia where I would say genuinely that the funding landscape is quite old fashioned and generally not very based on relationships, or it is based in relationships, but they are not very visible. So it's based on relationships between funders. So there's lots of kind of very invisible relationships between funders, from the sharing of information and things, but the relationship between funders and what we would call partners, but what most funders would call grantees, tends to be very transactional and very contractual. There's a lot of inherent paradynamics there. And this isn't unique to Southeast Asia. This is generally quite often the case. So that's my role in the foundation is I head up our grant making work and building relationships with stakeholders in the communities that we work in, is fundamental to what I do. And to how we try to work as a funder and a partner.

Viola: (03:26)

I read one of the blog posts and I think I read something around not accepting written proposals. But kind of basing the funding relationships on real relationships. So tell me a little more about how that decision was made and how that process is going, how people react to the prospect of not having to submit a written proposal straight away... or ever?

ANNE: (04:08)

I mean, usually it's ever. Obviously we have to submit written documents to the board, but I write them and I send them to the partner said to check they're happy with them. So I do the legwork on that. That decision was very straightforward. It was taken between me and our executive chairman, who's also worked a lot with non-profits. I can't count the number of funding proposals I've written in my life. They'd be in the hundreds. The thing about them is that it's basically a strange sorts of dance that you do. So our funds will put out a call proposals using a certain language with a certain set of criteria. And you will often– It's very rare as a non-profit that, sometimes it happens, but it's rare that you read a call for proposals and think, oh yeah, that exactly fits with what we're doing and what we believe in or know needs to be done in a community and what we can do. Usually it sort of fits, but it sort of doesn't, so then your written application– I'm sounding very cynical with it and it's not always the case, but it is often the case that your written application is one of two things. It's two things they want, it's a pitch document saying why you are the very best to do what you do. So there's no scope to be open about challenges, what you're learning, you are expected to have the solution. So the typical format is in one paragraph, give me the "problem" [air quotes] that you're addressing in the community. And then in two pages or four pages or whatever, summarize to me what your solution to that problem is. So that's the first thing and say there's a kind of a pitch element there that you have to have all the answers. And even just the waiting of, so– I'll come onto that. But even just the way that's structured, it's kind of "This is the problem. Tell me the solution". So that's the first thing you have to kind of pitch and have all the answers. The second thing is nine times out of 10 in my experience, you have to sort of sort of shoehorn what you're actually doing into what you want into what the funder wants to see. Say that might be in as much as just using different language or it might be taking a bit of your current program and kind of squishing it into their priorities. Or it might be worse. They might be adding a bit on to your existing program to kind of fit their criteria. So you end up with two things. One is you have to have all the, you have to pitch and have all the answers. And the second is often, it's not actually completely what you want to do, but you sort of have to squidge it into their priorities. So as a concrete example of that, I set up a social enterprise some time ago, and we got some funding from a really great funder working around, as a particular priority, supporting women and girls. Which is great, and we have a lot of time for that. But the social enterprise is also working with men and boys, so we could only get bits funded. We have to kind of– we were very open, we said, look, we don't exclusively work with women. And they said, well, that's fine, but we could only kind of report on and get funded bits that were for... that were within that. It was kind of a strange dance. So that was that, that was why the decision was taken was that we just felt it was– for the time that the organization spends writing a document and the time that funders then spend reviewing those documents. And then what happens is as a funder you read the document, and you don't know the organization. So what happens is you have a whole bunch of other questions, right? You'd like, even if the proposal is 10 pages long, which takes a non-profit probably the best part of a week to write, you're still going to have a whole bunch of questions. So we just felt that it was much better to say, okay, it's not that this doesn't take time, it does, but let's have an open conversation about understanding what are the problems that you're working to explore, what are the issues in the community. And we spend a lot of time on that, lots and lots of time on what are the needs and understanding who are the other stakeholders. And then we try to have an open conversation about, okay, what are you doing? What are you learning? Um, but not in the "tell us what your solution is". Just tell us what you're doing now. Tell us what you'd like to do. Tell us what's working, tell us what's not. And then the conversation goes from there. And the idea is that it starts to set the conversation up as a much more equal partnership. Now I need to be candid that there's inherent tensions in that model. It's not that it's the perfect model. So the, the first tension for that is you don't know who you don't know. So the advantage to the call for proposals is that you could potentially reach organisations that you otherwise wouldn't meet. So we operate on a very networked approach, so we have a core of partners who are genuine partners, they report on me and on us that much more than they report to us. Through them, we tend to meet with other organisations that we work with. It's sort of that snowball network effect from them. But that is one issue, that you don't know who you don't know. And the second thing is, and I put this in the blog, but it's really important to say that, um, this process also takes time. You know, we do ask for time, takes time to write a proposal, but it also takes time to have a proper conversation. We hope it's more meaningful time because we can have a much more open conversation and we can be much more up front with an organization if the conversation isn't going to progress. That's the second tension. And the third tension I think is that… it takes time. It takes time to build that, to get that elephant in the room out of the way and to kind of work on that power dynamic between the one who has the money and the one who is asking for the money, you know? That can often be an elephant in the room. And sometimes that takes, that takes a long time. You know, sometimes that takes weeks, months, years to really get to the level of partnership in the way that we describe it. We definitely have those relationships, but that's taken a lot of time. It's if you genuinely want to put an equal partnership, it's built on trust and that takes a huge amount of time. In terms of how it's received generally I would say it's received very, very well and we get a lot of positive feedback on that. Certainly in terms of the depth of relationships that we build and therefore ultimately the impact that allows us to have. From having worked in other foundations, it doesn't compare. And I'm not saying that as in like, "oh, look at us, we're doing it so great". We're not, there's lots we are getting wrong. But it's certainly what it allows us to do, and I do this on a very regular basis, is to have conversations with our partners where, you know, the reality of working in any community trying to affect any kind of social change is that change is inherent in that. And you can design an intervention based on everything that you know and with the best of intent. And then the external environment changes or you learn something new or the context changes and everything changes. And if you've got that relationship, you can be open about what you're learning and say cool. And that can be in a positive way in terms of, "Cool, this model is really working. We need to adapt it and grow it in". Or you know, "We thought this was the right way to go, it wasn't". Or, "We hired the wrong person", you know, which is a very common one, there are always massive HR challenges, "and we need to fix that". That in my experience, having worked with non-profits and having worked in other foundations, the sort of traditional, more detached model, doesn't allow for you to have those open conversations of these are the challenges that we're facing. And you know, running a non-profit honestly, or an intervention, it's really tough and it can be really lonely. And so with our current partners, the biggest part of my role, it actually is often to be there as a support and as a partner and to say, look, as long as we have confidence in the mindset and the approach of you and your team and have confidence that you are working to try and maximize the impact you can have, we expect there to be change. We expect there to be iteration. We are backing you 110%. It's not that if we find out that you hired someone and then found out they weren't any good, that we will then take, you know, retract the money, which can happen, you know. Obviously if there's fraud or child protection or anything, we do that. That's a different story, cause that's negligence. But if it's to do with the reality of operations or the relative, the context in a community changing, I hope, I like to think that we have the depth of relationship with our partners where they can– and it can be everything from "Cool, this happened today", to, "Oh my gosh, this has happened, what the hell do we do?". That ultimately allows us– it allows them the confidence that we're there and we can back them and we still do. Which I hope then allows them to get on and do what they want to do in communities without having the baggage of having to manage a very complex relationship or sort of make out that everything's fine when it's not or, at the very worst, continue delivering an intervention the way you had designed it, when you know now that actually that's not the best way to do it, but because the funding is restricted and you're contractually set and the funder doesn't have any flexibility and you don't feel you have the strength of relationship to be honest and open, then you continue delivering what you designed two and a half years ago, which isn't what's needed now. Does that make sense?

Viola: (14:39)

It is definitely part of my experience with funded projects and things not necessarily being exactly the way they were designed or sometimes completely different, but having challenges in explaining to the funding body, that it makes much more sense to divest from this section of the project to invest more in that section because this is not working, that is working, but then that creates huge problems with reporting.

ANNE: (15:10)

And trust.

Viola: (15:10)

Right. In terms of– so, two things I would like to talk about. One of them is in fact reporting and how that is done and used, or not used as an instrument for learning and disseminating knowledge. Let's just start from there. How did you come to choose the type of reporting, the style and the type of information that you require?

ANNE: (15:52)

We don't have a set reporting format. The vast majority of our reports– so what we say is send us whatever "data" [air quotes]. And I used the term like that [air quotes] you collect yourself as an organization that you learn from. So whatever quant or qual metrics you collect and use to evidence "is what we're doing working or not and what are we learning and how do we need to adapt?". Whatever about that you're willing to share with us, send it to us. And that's fine. In whatever format you collect it in, don't need to put it into a different format. And that's the first thing. The second thing is we have a lot of conversations, and that can be Whatsapps, so that can be someone sending a photo saying, "This is what's happening", or, "Look, this is a screenshot of a report of some feedback that I got from government about our policy work", and that's fine. I mean that would all count as reporting. I don't see it that way, but it is, that is what it is. It's certainly not the case that we have a sort of a quarterly... well we do this, we do have quarterly update calls, but the reality of the relationships is that we're in touch. I'm in touch with all of our partners at least on a weekly basis. And that's, I need to stress that that's not me. You know, I'm very conscious about it– I don't do the annoying funder that's all like "hello!...". That's usually them texting me saying, "We're doing this or what do you think about this? Or can you connect me to so and so?". So therefore, with that depth of relationship, it kind of makes the need to report in a formal way much less because it means, I feel like I'm much more up to speed. So any reporting that's done internally is done– any reporting that we need to do is to our board to keep them abreast. And then if we have a strong relationship and I know what's going on, then I can just summarize that and say, "Cool, this is what's happening. This is what the metrics are, this is what we're learning, this is what they've learnt". Reporting is very much like– our working principles are we don't have any set templates or timelines you share with us, whatever you are happy to share that you collect anyway that you use to inform your own learning. The second thing is we will be in very regular touch. Hopefully if I've developed the strong enough relationship. If I haven't, then that's okay too. So we're very much up to speed with what's happening. So therefore we don't need to necessarily have a half day meeting to say what's happened over the last six months because we're in touch every week so I know what's happening. So that's fine. Financial reporting we have to do because it's a VUS compliance. Say we just asked for a simple excel spreadsheet breakdown of "Tell me how you spend the money".That's it. And then in terms of sort of sharing, you asked a question about sharing learning– the simplest way I try and do that is just through blogs reflecting on what we're learning as a foundation. Because we're a private foundation we don't, and I really feel strongly about this, we don't need to say, "In the last six months we've worked with– our funding has reached 10,000 children" or whatever. It's fine for funders that do need to say that if they're a corporate foundation and they'd be talking to shareholders or whatever, that's fine. I get that that's the way that system is structured. But for us, we absolutely don't need to do that. And so we shouldn't. The nature, again, going back to what our role in the "ecosystem" [air quotes] if you'd like, our role as a private foundation is to really fund– we believe, I believe– is to fund often the relationship building work actually that facilitates connections between organisations or between stakeholders. That is by definition not really conducive to the sort of traditional impact measurement approach. I mean, there are metrics you can collect it and they kind of banale and they're time consuming. So I totally understand that. The EU or a corporate foundation, it's much more compelling for them to say "we worked with 10,000 kids" than it is to say "We have supported the collaboration between six non profits", or, "We've curated a learning journey between four non profits". That stuff is less tangible but it's really, really vital. A lot of our funding funds, the less sexy stuff I guess. And a lot of it funds direct work in communities, absolutely. But it also funds a lot of the kind of relationship building between different actors and different players.

Viola: (21:06)

Things that are really hard to report on.

ANNE: (21:10)

Things that are really hard to report on, exactly. And so if we're going to fund that, we need as an organization to be very comfortable with not being able to say, "There's been x percentage change in this", you know, and we're fine with that, we're very comfortable with that. That's not a problem. But a lot of organisations, even if they wanted to be as people working in the foundation, the structure of the organization wouldn't allow them to be because of where their funding comes from originally, whether it's shareholders or taxpayers, whereas we don't have that. We have an extraordinary opportunity, an extraordinary flexibility to be a private foundation with an endowment that doesn't have family members on the board. That's very, very rare structurally. That brings with it a huge responsibility to fund the things that are less fundable, but are vital, we think.

Viola: (22:11)

So what role do trust and value alignment or values in general play in all of this?

ANNE: (22:18)

Fundamental. Really fundamental. And again, it takes time. You know, it doesn't, it doesn't happen overnight. Values alignment and trust is absolutely the honesty. It's the core of everything that we do actually. And that works both ways. We always say that we fund values, alignment and mindset, the mindset of the organization and the people within it first, and then everything else follows. If we have that, then the conversation can progress. If we don't have that, then from our own experience so far, we can't build the depth of relationships that we would like to. Therefore it's best that we just don't. As I said in the blog, it's really important– it's not that we're in any way saying that the values that we hold dear or the values that we try and embody in the foundation are the right values or the most important over other values. It's not that. It's just that for us and the type of organization we're trying to build, we have found that organisations that share those values and are willing to be open and collaborative and build trust, those are the ones that we can build the strongest relationships with and the most trusted relationships. And that in turn over time has demonstrated to us that those are then the most impactful interventions in communities. So therefore it's kind of a chain reaction. It's not just, you know, I think relational funding has become very zeitgeist and it's not that we want to do this just because we think it's cool. It's because consistently, in our experience, that depth of relationship transmits almost step by step into impacts with communities and in communities. So it's totally, it's totally fundamental.

Viola: (24:15)

What are the challenges in that?

ANNE: (24:19)

There's a few. One is time. In any relationship, whether it's a work relationship or a personal relationship, you need trust. Trust is built gradually. It's not something that you meet someone in the street and you trust them with your children instantly. You know, it's something that takes time. For us, I think there's a line to walk where building trust takes time. But also you have, we always need to be very conscious of the fact that, because we tend to work with smaller community based organisations, it's not viable for them to spend six months talking to us before anything happens. That's just not an option. Right? And if we ever do that, then we've become the type of funder I never want to be. So there's a line to walk there in terms of just balancing different timeframes. We're in the extraordinary position that we have resources. So we have got, we can have time, but if you're a small organization, you often don't have time because time is money and money is something you genuinely don't have. So a lot of our, I think I said in the blog, a lot of our early stage grants, actually it's not the primary reason that we fund. The primary reason we fund is we buy into the mindset and we feel that we can build that depth of relationship. But a lot of that early stage funding, is to give the partner trust in us that we mean what we say in terms of if we find like-minded organisations, we will take a part, and so we can make a decision quite quickly. But also what that gives us is the time in literally, sort of crudely, it's buying time to build a stronger relationship and get to know each other better as people and organisations. That's one tension. I think the other tension is if you're building a strong relationship and you're building trust, that's inherently personal. I mean if– I have to say this has not ever happened, but it's something that I'm very aware of, that if there was a betrayal of that trust on either side, that would be viscerally personal, right. Because these are people that you know, they know me and they know the team. Whereas if an organization– I need to say this has never ever happened, but let's just play out a role play scenario where we had a partner that we thought we had a really strong relationship with, there was real, really strong trust on both sides, we share a lot of what we're learning, what mistakes we've made, they share the same and then we find that actually they've laundered at a whole load of money, for example. Let's just take that as a scenario. Obviously that would be hideous from an impact perspective. Obviously that would be hideous from the foundation's perspective, but it would be much more than that. It would be a viscerally personal issue for the team. A really personal betrayal of trust because I don't think– there's not a delineation between– it's the same spectrum of trust between people and trust between organisations. It's not that you can have trust between organisations and have no trust in relationship between the people within those organisations. The two are interlinked. So therefore if there's a betrayal of trust that the organization, a loss of trust, that is inherently, personal I think. One other reflection that I have is it takes a bit of time for organisations. There's an element of walking the walk if you'd like. It's very easy to say, "Oh, we're relational funders". I don't actually use that terminology, but to you I would. But we value trust and partnership and values alignment deeply, really, really deeply and we work really hard to build it. I tend to find with new partners there can be understandably a reticence around "Okay, what does that actually mean? What does you know, really? Is that just the latest kind of jargon thing?". We need to really show that early. I mean to show it all the way through, but particularly early on, make sure that we are really walking the walk and again to build that trust so that then they're like "Ok, they do really mean if there's a challenge we can talk about it and they're not gonna say right, that's it. We're not going to fund you anymore".

Viola: (29:04)

So it's again a matter of trust I guess, but sort of the other way around. So it's not only you having to trust them them, but it's also them having to trust you.

ANNE: (29:17)

Exactly. Right. But if it's a genuine partnership, the inherent assumption there is that it's equal. Therefore there has to be trust on both sides. Everyone's is all "Do you trust your partners?". Yeah, we do. But it's also what we worked to build. Is the trust the other way that they trust us, you know? Because otherwise if you don't have it both ways, it isn't a partnership. That's a one directional relationship. That's middle partnership know. I don't know if this is making any sense.

Viola: (29:49)

It is, it is making a lot of sense and it's really interesting to me. One thing I wanted to ask you, but I don't quite know how to put it. I was wondering if you have noticed any cultural barriers or differences that have been sort of evident and significant to your work. I mean, of course there are cultural barriers between anyone because of course we all come from different walks of life. You're from [European country], right?

ANNE: (30:30)

Originally, yeah.

ANNE: (30:32)

Originally. So having that background and going into a Southeast Asian context, dealing with local organisations, I imagine there would be cultural differences and I'm just curious about how that has affected your work.

ANNE: (30:47)

I mean there are definitely cultural differences. There's also language differences. Not so much in [country 1] because English is very widely spoken. In [country 2], English is not so widely spoken. I think the biggest cultural barriers are– probably one of the biggest ones is around, if you're running a non-profit in let's say [country 2], the funding landscape generally there is very, very traditional. And so if we come to visit, obviously the way that meeting tends to go is sort of an initial pitch type meeting. That has a very strong inherent power dynamic that sort of unspoken in the room. It's like, here are the funders and, candidly, here are the foreign funders, right? I mean, I'm not from [country 2].

[Name], the chairman, his wife is [from country 2]. He's lived in [country 2] for [many years]. But if you meet him, he's [European country] by background, so you're not going to look at him and think, he's [from country 2], cause he's not. Candidly, there's definitely a kind of ethnic race aspect to it, which we work really hard to overcome, that's why we're based in Southeast Asia. That's why we're moving the foundation out of [Western country] even though we've only ever been registered as a [Western] Foundation, we don't fund anything in [Western country]. So there's definitely that inherent power dynamic "Here comes the foundation, the foreign, the overseas funder, so we need to pitch and tell them the story they want to hear". There's definitely a very strong culture around not challenging anything in any way. Like, even if I think what you're saying is totally ridiculous, people will say "Oh yes, great idea". And then sort of raise the eyes later. I think those are probably the two biggest. There are others, but those are probably the two biggest ones. The power dynamic one would be the same. That would be the same anywhere in the world. That's the same in [country of origin], you know, I'm [nationality] originally, but if you're coming from a [nationality] foundation to a [nationality] non-profit, it's the same dynamic.

Viola: (33:46)

How do you adapt or work with that? I imagine that you could work a bit towards deconstructing it and making people understand that challenges are welcome to be discussed, but at the same time it is also a cultural matter. I imagine you can't just expect people to be like "Oh, right".

ANNE: (34:09)

No, no, no. Absolutely not. Because people need to have trust that if they're going to talk about challenges, you're not going to judge them for it. You're absolutely right, you can't just say it– I mean, you can, but you won't get an honest answer to "What are your biggest challenges?". It's a bit like a job interview, right? When someone says, "What are your weaknesses?", the standard stock answer is you say something that's actually a strength. Like, "I work too hard" or something. Honestly all of this is art, not science. I think the first way that we get over it is through connections and kind of "recommendations" [air quotes], or referrals, if you like, from other organisations. A lot of our newer partners are known to our existing partners. So they would say, hopefully, and we get this quite a lot, "[Foundation name] is a really good partner and a good funder to us. They've been a really genuine partner. They know a lot of what's happened. We're very open with them. We can share what we do". So that definitely helps when you've got an NGO in a non-profit to non-profits conversation without the funders saying that we taught them about all sorts of stuff and they're fine with it. That generally helps to lay the ground a bit, I think before we even meet with them.

ANNE: (35:28)

There are two things. One is that we are constantly learning as an organization. We've made loads of mistakes, but because we're a funder, we can and should put that in the public domain, as a non-profits it's much harder. And when we were working for non-profits, the number of times that I sat in front of a funder and made out like I knew everything because I had to, when I actually didn't, but I couldn't say that because they were expecting me to have all the answers. What we found is to be really, really humble from our side because, let's be clear, our job as a foundation is very much easier than running a non-profit. And we can say that cause we've run non profit and it's really bloody hard. We have made a load of mistakes. These are some things that we've done wrong. And then referencing the fact that we have been often in the position where you'd have to seem to have all the answers when– particularly something like scaling an intervention, the reality of scaling something is you need to test different models. But usually the funding landscape is like "Cool. You've got something that is 'proven' [air quotes] so tell me what's the one model you're going to do to scale it?". The thing is you don't know it, right? There's multiple ways to scale things. So usually what you need to do, the sensible approach, is to test a few different ones. But usually if you're sort of pitching for scaling money, you need to have one route to scale over three years and sort of stand behind that. And that's a really uncomfortable position to be in because outwardly you're saying that you know all the answers and iAnneardly you are thinking "Oh my goodness, I actually hope this works". So all of that is a very long winded way of saying, I think again it takes time, but the two things that we found help, one is kind of referrals and referrals from other organisations saying that they have been really open with [Foundation name]. And then the second is we find that us being super genuine, super humble and very open about mistakes that we've made as a starting point kind of opens up that vulnerability and helps to level that power dynamic of where the all-knowing funder comes in. We say, "Look, we need to be clear. We spent a lot of time in these communities. We've worked in these communities, but we're not here every single day like you guys are, so we can't possibly know as much as you do. We just don't".

Viola: (38:36)

Correct me if I'm wrong, but it looks like you're almost modelling the type of attitude that you want to see in the people that you are funding. "Look at us. We're very vulnerable and we're genuine. We're telling you all the challenges that we were going through. We know what, we know what your work is like, but not specifically, we've just been through running a non-profit. We know it's hard".

ANNE: (39:03)

Exactly. We really try and model and that that applies to anything that we do. We always say, whatever we ask of partners we have to do ourselves. That's a really good summary that we really try– the values that are on the website, they're not just words, you know, and I know loads of organisations say that, but for us we really try to live them and we really try to hold ourselves to account on those and to model the same, exactly, model the same behaviours that we look for in partners. Do we get it right every time? No. Is it something that's constantly evolving and learning? Yes. And does it mean that things are a bit more messy and emergent? Yes. Cause it's much "cleaner" [air quotes] to say, "Here's a call for proposals". You submit a proposal, I read it, maybe I interview you. And then either it's a yes or a no. That's a sort of standard process and people are much more, most organisations are much more– they didn't like it, but at least they know what the lay of the land is. Whereas starting from position of let's have an open conversation or let's try to build that trust and model that behaviour to facilitate an open conversation, that is more emerging. It's a bit more messy. There's definitely tensions that, and we definitely, definitely didn't get it right every time.

Viola: (40:38)

And what does it look like when you don't get it right?

ANNE: (40:49)

It's confusion or blurriness or like, say "What does that mean?". And it takes people a while to sit with that sort of discomfort of emergence type thing. I think very few people generally– we know that emergence is inherent to any social innovation and design process, but I think most people and most organisations aren't very comfortable with it. It is not something that we like, as humans, so that can be a downside. But I do find it interesting. There's definitely things we can improve, but would I change, flip the way that we work to do proposals and things like that? Not in any scenario, no. You can ask our partners, and maybe I'm wrong and maybe I'm deluded, in which case I need to be fired, but I do genuinely believe that the strength of relationships that we have with our partners is worth that messy emergence and allows them, I hope, to have much more freedom and flexibility to do what they want to do. It goes well beyond the money. The money of course is vital, but it's much more about we then becoming a connector, and actually often just a friend to have a glass of wine with and have someone to say "Oh my gosh, I'm really struggling with this" or the other way, me saying, "Oh my gosh we've taken this new project, I don't really know how it's going". That becomes that kind of trusted space. And actually, sorry I should've said that, another way that we definitely build that kind of partnership and trust is to be very deliberate and intentional about seeking input from our partners. Both feedback on us and what we're doing, and it can be anonymized or face to face, but also getting their ideas as new strands of work emerge. We would never do that without input from partners and we would never take on a new partner without input from existing partners. So they become very much that thought partner too.

Viola: (43:13)

I wanted to ask you, if you have a little more time...?

ANNE: (43:16)

I need to go in a few minutes but I've got a few more minutes. We can always do another call another day because this is really interesting to me.

Viola: (43:24)

It's great to have the perspective of someone who deals with the funding bit because the way that the work is narrated usually is that there is the community, the designer, the funder, the impact evaluator. But then it's just a great mishmash of relationships. So even if I want to do a research on design and on the impact of design on relationships and vice versa, I cannot leave out the funding part because this is so integral to how design projects go forward.

ANNE: (44:06)

The way that funding is structured often drives the way that design process happens, the good and the bad.

Viola: (44:15)

The last thing that I wanted to ask you before you go is, who do you usually interact with when we've been talking about developing relationships with partners? I just want to know who the person is, the human being you interact with.

ANNE: (44:29)

It's a good question. The question. So when we're building relationships and when we're looking at what we can make together and whether we can fund them, generally we'd meet everybody. Not in one go, we wouldn't get the whole team in the room together. So usually we start with meeting the chief exec with the founder of the cofounders or whatever. But then we always, always, always spend time with the outreach workers or social workers or social advisors or whatever the kind of grassroots level of the organization is. I spend quite a lot of time with the admin staff and security guards, really just to get a sense of what is the fibre of this organization. How does the organization behave? What are the values that are lived at this organization? And does that match with what the management team and cofounders are saying. It might be different words obviously, but are we seeing this as a concrete example of that? We're always interested in the dynamics between the chief exec or the cofounders and a couple of other team members. If we have a meeting where it's only the chief exec that speaks, that tells a lot for us, whereas if we have a meeting where you notice they say "What do you think?" Or even if they are not invited... That's great cause that's again the kind of culture and openness that we– we don't just want to build an open relationship just with the chief exec. We want to build to an open relationship with across the whole team. And so initially we will definitely meet with as many people as we can from the security guards to the other persons, to the finance people... But again, that's nuanced because we can't meet every single person. It would take ages. We try and strike a balance between meeting different team members, but we would very, very rarely, unless it was a startup, or a one or two person organization, we very rarely just meet the chief exec or the management team. We always go out and spend time in communities and see work in communities. Once they become a partner that relationships tend to be sort of mishmash of always the CEO and the co-founder. We try and be working really hard to make sure that our relationships are beyond that. So generally the closest relationship is with the chief exec. And that's usually the ones we Whatsapp asking "How are you going?". So this morning I was chatting with one of our partners who's about to go and have a baby about something totally non-work related. But then, it's not that I look at indicators, but if it's a bigger organisation, if it's beyond the start-up phase and it's a bigger organization and I've only got a really solid relationship with one person, that's a bit of a trigger warning that I to work harder to build relationships with people who are directly implementing the work in communities, whether that's a social worker or juvenile justice worker or whatever it is. So yeah, it tends to be throughout the organization, usually the strongest with the chief exec. And that's partly because a big part of the relationship– when we, when we get to kind of a really trusted relationship, a big part of it is around being a thought partner and bouncing ideas. And perhaps sharing things that they might not want to share with the rest of the team at this point. But would always be also as much as possible with community workers or advisors or whoever the sort of people building relationships in community.

Viola: (48:54)

I think it’s important because then when you talk about building trusting relationship with organizations and aligning values, of course a lot of the values, you see them play out in relationships between the people in the same organization.

ANNE: (49:07)

Yes, exactly.

Viola: (49:08)

Ok, thank you so much. I've taken plenty of notes and I have the recording of course [brief recap of what the next steps of the research are]. I will just keep in touch with how things evolve.

ANNE: (50:05)

I'd love to see this. I think it's really, really valued and really needed. It'd be super useful for informing our approach as we're just figuring it out, and there's lots that we can do better. So I'd love to see the final research and going forward, if I can be helpful or if you're coming to Southeast Asia, drop me a line and we can easily do another chat or you can come and meet some of the partners.

Viola: (50:32)

That'd be great. So thank you so much again, take care.

ANNE: (50:40)

Cheers. Bye. Bye.

---STOPPED RECORDING---

# Appendix D Example of collaborative note-taking in the Practice Group

The following is an example of the collaborative notes taken during a meeting with the Practice Group on 13/05/2021. All names and personal details have been redacted for privacy reasons. Every new paragraph contains notes collaboratively taken by the group while one Practice Group member spoke. There were four members participating in this conversation.

## Check-in

Heat 50°, humidity, typhoon season. How are cats surviving outside on the concrete? I let them inside and feed them cold raw fish. People take it very personally when I highlight systemic oppression. Why do they take it so personally? People are realising how angry I am – I've never changed, they just are realising from knowing me better. So they patronisingly ask, *are you ok? Is anything wrong?* 🖕😡🖕

Huge responsibility with work for the government. Intense workshops, swift turnaround. Should've worn my brown pants.

I'm tired. It's spring, poplars are making pollen / blossom.

Been away for a few days – saw my mum, then my partner. She wanted me to go, then said don't bother, then said come, then said stay... She's very changeable. Goes from "I don't care" to "staystaystay". Thought the bubble had burst... and then it all changed again. That's what it's like, it's not going to change... Emotional rollercoaster. I'm in self-isolation, wearing an apocalypse-proof mask. Pretty weird to be in bed with someone with a mask, but hey, people pay a lot of good money for that!

## Communication

***What did we discuss last time?***

Amongst the cats, I've been learning a lot about how similar communication is across species, e.g. non-verbal communication and
Last time we talked about roles and the masks we put on, and existential crises as ways to address crisis in conjunction with other people.

It's come up with other groups since I started doing a . The style, tone and texture of the communication truly go beyond the words we speak. Conversations centre stories.

Been interesting running the course, becoming a host. Also began to go into a way to consider different contexts and dance between contexts. Find it interesting how aligned it's been with and the ways we communicate - vulnerability, willingness to express as our whole selves and be authentic and true. It's been nice, I have a call on Wednesday nights, on Thursday nights - It's a nice little loop from one to the next. They're slightly different but slightly similar. Building solidarity, building our capacity to connect, and also in a digital space - the is the only other time I've felt that apart from

Lectures on behavioural evolution by [Robert Sapolsky at Stanford University](#).
Non violent Communication. Biological and social evolution, what is this thing we're designing for? This human? What being human means, menas we need to know more about where we're coming from. Seeing in etc - Too much intellectualisation and not enough practice. Not open enough for everyday people. Where is the language? What if we return to species. What can we understand about ourselves if we understand other species. The unconscious, irrational etc but we can't interface with the subconscious part - most important part, unconscious. Is it another framework? Who designed it? Why is it so popular? Is it part of worldviews? Is this cultural hegemony ("homogeneity" is good too)? How does it help us to become more human? Use our own, local concepts, approaches, languages.

When the brought together people from all walks of life, people who did not necessarily have "the lingo", it was very refreshing. People telling stories from their lives, from their specific local context. There was a nice mix too in terms of diversity – I was expecting a sea of white faces.

Social justice activists from Southeast Asia came together for the first time a few days ago to discuss building an intersectional movement for democracy. All trained in NVC by the white folk, and feel there is a common language to build upon across the movement. So not saying a common language is all bad, but rather to notice and to apply it carefully.

In NVC everyone's needs matter. Solutions that all are happy with and everyone gets what they need (not necessarily what they want). Advertising tells us to want things, not what we need and it won't make us happy! NVC gets to what matters. Great to see it spreading. It's being brought into XR activism for learning skills in conflict de escalation—using it in provocative action but want to avoid the conflict while getting noticed. It's about caring about everyone. Good to see XR bringing this into the toolbox.

So just like how Okayama bus drivers went on strike. They continued to run and refused to take anyone's money.

Strange experience with my workshop. Training with Ria Baeck (collective presencing) emphasis on speaking to the centre. People should be taking turns, shouldn't always be the same person who starts and speaks to the centre. A friend (writer) is really getting into it but kept taking the stage. Conscious of the vibe being *not quite right, not* enough space left. Didn't know what to do. It felt off. But what is it? Is it prescriptive if you create rules around the types of communication that are accepted?

Method for speaking to get things out of a workshop, that's the boundary. If you want to participate and practice eg democratic discussion, then you have to participate in it and practice it. Some people have problems processing without saying it out loud to people (and therefore taking up space). Does it need another method for comms, eg a document where people can add additional thoughts, links, info etc.

Good lessons from Quakers. There's a lot of history, and protocol, and established patterns to how people communicate in quaker meetings. There is no leader, everyone can speak, but you should not speak unless you really have something to say. And when someone speaks, they are thoughtfully listened to. If this doesn't happen, it's considered disrespectful and someone would speak with you privately to explain that's not how it's done here. There are other meetings where you only speak once on a certain topic.

Is it Quakers who come together to sit in quiet reflection as a group, and if you are called to speak, then you do, but the basis is that you are...

...listening to the message of God!

Such a mood, – someone making a joke that other people don't appreciate, and you can *feel* it, and then it's like... such a mood. Is there a protocol to say "can we stop for a moment to address this thing that is going on that is messing with the vibe"?

In NVC, it would be like "I see this is happening, and it makes me feel this way, and this is what I need".

Do you wish you'd brought it up ' ?

Not in the moment, but I was really the only one who could do it because I'm his friend.

We are programmed to speak/hear in particular (blamey) ways. NVC is learning how to express yourself in ways that don't put the other person in the wrong. The language is a skill. Finding ways that call attention to the behaviour without making them feel wrong.

Calling attention to the behaviour without making someone feel wronged - calling attention to that behaviour in yourself - speaking to that person about a time when you've been really excited about something and found yourself taking up too much space - and allowing that person to come to that awareness by themselves, "oh I think I've been doing that actually." If you want to correct behaviour in a workshop, always talk about it as a behaviour you've exhibited in the past.

It's always better to enunciate what we do want rather than what we don't want, i.e. rather than saying "stop doing this", say "let's do that" instead.

Modeling vs. rule setting.

Difficult when there is no facilitator.

talked about how his crew ended up thinking about money - they would be trying to make business decisions, and to address conflict, they had to talk about their emotional relationship with money. I remembered thinking at the time that it was a big thing to have to talk through. Taking the whole thing sideways and talking about those feelings - group therapy session that might extend multiple meetings - just being able to be open to fractal deeper and deeper - sounds really good, but also sounds like a massive investment. Possibly not always possible for every group.

You brought up group therapy and therapy in general. For some of these convos there is a huge amount of self-awareness needed, some people don't have it. Some people are quite adverse to the idea of having to dive deep into whatever they feel and observe it, engage with it, in ways that can stir up past traumas, difficulties, feelings difficult to make sense of. When I discussed this with my friend, he said what we're doing is a bit like a therapy session. My father, a psychoanalyst, said that sometimes these types of activities can fall into "psychobanalysis" -

exploring these with a willingness to analyse them but not doing a good job. We can get into these difficult conversations with the wrong people, and it doesn't go well, because sometimes some people are just not ready to go into that depth. It's harder to deal with these emotions, and they realise they need to leave that conversation, and all the conflicts that come with it. Simple taught, but huge in practice. It has huge risks too - losing a friend, losing a relationship - is very easy this way.

I don't want to talk to my boss about what my goals are in life! None of his business. People don't need to know this kind of shit about each other as long as they're able to do what they planned. It sounds like we're trying to manufacture relationships. Can be very intrusive. I don't want to be a friend, I'm not marrying you or being adopted by you. Don't judge me based on my desire to build connection with you. It will come in due time, if the conditions are right. Can be very manipulative – finding buttons you can press. These spaces we are talking about – NVC, PNP, Quakers – by simply showing up, you are expected to have a certain behaviour, without necessarily having or respecting the building of a relationship.
Being in these conversations with people you don't want to talk with. Sometimes you don't need to know this shit about each other! Trying to manufacture a relationship, it's not being human!

A lot of these spaces we pay to be in. We are expected to engage because we paid – a bit like therapy, you pay the therapist, you expect them to probe. You also expect them to know when to stop, though.

Often that forcing of relationship that happens in workplaces happens in the interest of effective team-building so that a team can perform at a high level to make and save more money for the company they're working for. This thing about corporate retreat, workshop on team-building, etc. All these manufactured activities, to engage each other - it's so contrived, specific, organised with this intention to build relationships to do this thing, that the forcing of it is the barrier in itself. When I'm forced to build a relationship with someone, that's incredible resistance for me. I want to be a willing participant with agency in the emergent relationships that I keep consenting to over time. If I'm forced, I'm not down with it. If I'm paying to be in the space, there's still money involved with it, there is that weird feeling at the beginning of the course, what is this space that I've paid to be in, am I going to like it? All this trepidation, you experience it and then decide after. It does change the nature of experience, how you come into relationship with people.

I've had experiences where bosses get to know you, and use that knowledge to manipulate you. In the work I've been doing in the last 5-6 years, I've seen a lack of people having relationships with one another, or finding it difficult expressing themselves - that has caused problems, so I don't know if I've yet been in a company big enough where I felt like it's too much to ask me to express myself amongst my companies. Being forced to do anything is not pleasant.

## Check out

Looking forward to having the rest of my Thai green mango salad, and cold noodles and spring onions.

My experience has been the opposite – not building relationship with people I work with, and that doesn't help either. You're less likely to help someone if they're having a problem, for example.

I remembered something that happened in the first of my many workshops today - a high-level person in government was actually a dear friend of mine I played with. She walked in, we shouted OMG, hugged, and that workshop was quite wonderful and generative. Reflecting on everything we've just spoken about, the second workshop was with people I didn't know, we launched straight into it, info dump from each person, and the vibe was completely different. Remembered that there was this vibe of play that old friends got to come together just to play. Balance between relationship within the work context and where we strike that balance is different and unique to each of us.

Really hungry now! And thinking about what I'm going to order. Appreciated the conversation about when it is appropriate to stop the main topic and say "there is this thing we need to address". When is it appropriate? Are we here to play a role and get a thing done? Is this attitude going to work in the long term? Happy I could be here today, very generative convo.

Really happy that there's a lot of us today. I often walk in feeling inadequate and I walk out feeling adequate, and this is what I'm feeling today. I walked in thinking there were so many things I did wrong about building and tending to relationships, and then I realise everyone else has their own issues with this stuff, and that's quite relaxing and comforting to know. I'm feeling adequate essentially.

## Appendix E Diary examples

The following are examples of my diary entries containing personal reflections and summaries of meetings. All names and personal details have been redacted for privacy reasons. Since most of them are handwritten, and many are written in Italian (or in a mix of Italian and English), some excerpts were translated or typed.


The meeting went well. But one thing upset both , and me. complained that all the effort she is putting into this is unpaid for (unlike for us). This is a fault of this project, and we all know that. I liked the prompt reply that gave. He said she is right and that if he could go back, he would've designed the project differently - ~~She~~ I think she felt acknowledged and heard and her attitude smoothened.

As I wrote above, was KEY to this meeting. I am so glad he gets along with I feel she has an ally now.

I ~~am~~ discussed with the limitations of projects like this one. Why aren't we allowed to change the budget as we go? Why do we have to wait a full cycle of MEL before projects can be modified & improved? I am baffled. I keep thinking of my interview with and how she keeps regularly in touch with their grantees. We have our , his name is and I met him briefly at the open day. We had to ask for a minor (in my eyes) budget variation. ~~He~~ We want to buy services (eg: a reading expert), not just things, for the schools. He was v. casual about it and was very impressed, or so it seemed, by how flexible the Socent can be. I was like, ok thanks, but what about all these n changes that could make the project better that we cannot implement because the structure is

The meeting went well. But one thing upset both [Dario] and me. [Teacher] complained that all the effort she is putting into this is unpaid for (unlike for us). This is a fault of this project, and we all know that. I liked the prompt reply that [Dario] gave. He said she is right and that if he could go back, he would've designed the project differently. I think she felt acknowledged and heard and her attitude smoothened.
As I wrote above [the presence of a local political figure] was KEY to this meeting. I am so glad he gets along with [teacher]. I feel she has an ally now.
I discussed with [Dario] the limitations of projects like this one. Why aren't we allowed to change the budget as we go? Why do we have to wait a full cycle of monitoring and evaluation before projects can be modified and improved? I am baffled. I keep thinking of my interview with [Anne] and how she keeps regularly in touch with their grantees. We have our [Anne], his name is [redacted] and I met him briefly at the open day. We had to ask for a minor (in my eyes) budget variation […] He was very casual about it and [Dario] was very impressed, or so it seemed, by how flexible the [funder] can be. I was like ok, thanks, but what about all these [other] changes that could make the project better that we cannot implement because the structure is rigid?

*Figure E.1 A picture of a diary entry from an initial meeting with a school*

Anche scuole dove c'era più prospettive di attivare collaborazioni, è tutto fermo. Tipo in madonna che casino. Ciò che poteva essere un progetto innovativo ora è una cosa fatta a metà. Non riesco a non vederlo negativamente.

Nel progetto del giardino con ed io ci siamo fatti da parte nel momento in cui c'era da progettarlo. Basta aspettare, ed emerge un esperto. , eravamo tutti intorno al tavolo e una prof che ha fatto architettura ha tirato fuori i disegni del giardino, abbiamo guardato insieme alberi ed essenze, abbiamo considerato panchine e altri arredi. Nel mentre, parlava con l'esperto che sarebbe venuto a fare delle letture.

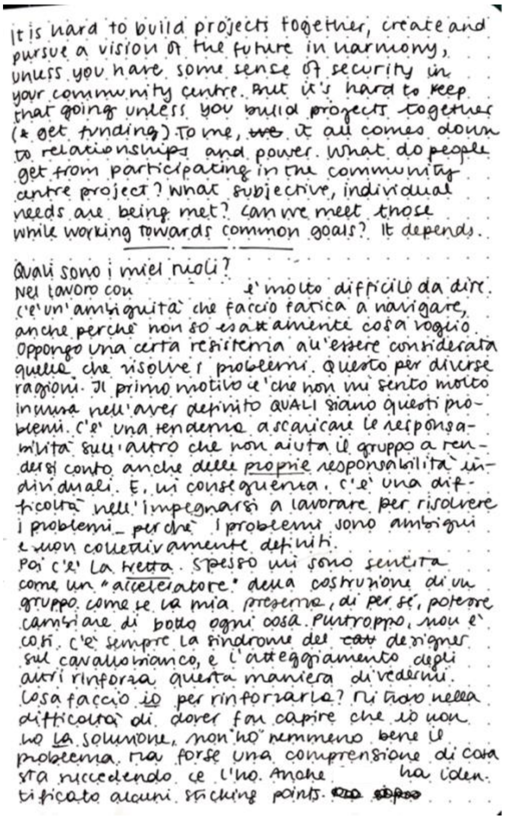
In quell'occasione, ed io ci siamo fatti molto da parte e loro hanno preso il comando. Non è sempre così però. A volte il nostro è un lavoro di supplenza, in cui un insegnante perso e solo viene aiutato. Anche per non esporre solo lei (penso e di ) alle ire della dirigente. A volte un insegnante invece, per quanto solo, prende le redini. Penso a di ...

In alcune scuole, il/la preside è coinvolto. In altre è assente. In altre è presente ma disponibile. Il nostro compito non è di gestire queste persone, ma di ascoltarle e far progredire le cose ugualmente, nonostante i problemi. A volte la qualità e l'efficienza ne risentono. Ma è tutto commisurato al contesto, e il contesto è relazioni. Voglio dire che se cambiano i prof, cambia il progetto. Non è "progettare le preside nelle scuole". È capire come progettare con le persone. Sì, il sistema scuola ha delle analogie, ma in realtà ogni scuola è una cosa a sé. Standardizzare il nostro approccio non è possibile perché non c'è uno "standard". Possiamo portare gli stessi tool ma non possiamo certo affrontare ogni gruppo di studenti allo stesso modo. Siamo partiti con un esercizio perché non ci conoscevamo, siamo partiti con OPERA. Ma non avremmo potuto continuare senza "personalizzarlo", perché appunto – stiamo avendo a che fare con persone inserite in comunità.

Come mi pongo io in tutto questo? Be' vorrei immaginarmi come un cavaliere del design che arriva a salvare le scuole in difficoltà su un cavallo bianco. E lo voglio perché non ho ancora cacciato la sensazione di dover "salvare" col design, supportare, sostenere. Ma la verità è che sono umana anche io, e la pandemia ha un effetto su di me, come su tutti. lo capisce. Ci sosteniamo a vicenda e cerchiamo di uscirne insieme senza morire di tutto – noia, isolamento e paura.

Even in schools where there were more chances to activate collaborations, everything has stalled […] Anyway, in the project of the school garden, Dario and I stepped aside when it came to designing it. You just have to wait, and an expert will emerge. So, we were all around the table, and one teacher who studied architecture pulled out drawings of the garden, we looked at them together, we considered benches and other furnishings […].
On that occasion, Dario and I really stepped aside, and they took the lead. It's not always like that though. Sometimes we have to be the substitutes, when a teacher is lost or alone in the project, and they need help. Other times teachers, however alone, take the lead.
[…] Our task is not to manage these people, but to listen to them and make things go forward despite the problems. Sometimes, quality and efficiency are affected. But it's all related to context, and the context is the relationships. I mean, the teachers change, the project changes. We are not 'designing in schools', we are learning to design with people. Standardising our approach is impossible because there is no 'standard'. We started with an exercise tool because we did not know the context […] but we could not have gone on without 'personalising' it, because we are dealing with people in their community. […]
What's my attitude in all of this? Well, I'd like to think of myself as a knight of design coming to save the struggling schools on a white horse. And I like that image because I haven't chased away the feeling that I need to 'save' through design, support, sustain. Truth is, I am human too, and the pandemic has an effect on me, like on anybody. Dario understands. We support each other and try to get out of this together without dying of everything – boredom, isolation, and fear.

*Figure E.2 Excerpts of my reflections on Building belonging in schools after the first lockdown*



It is hard to build projects together, create and pursue a vision of the future in harmony, unless you have some sense of security in your community centre. But it's hard to keep that going unless you build projects together (+ get funding) To me, ~~we~~ it all comes down to relationships and power. What do people get from participating in the community centre project? What subjective, individual needs are being met? Can we meet those while working towards common goals? It depends.

Quali sono i miei ruoli?
Nel lavoro con è molto difficile da dire. C'è un'ambiguità che faccio fatica a navigare, anche perché non so esattamente cosa voglio. Oppongo una certa resistenza all'essere considerata quella che risolve i problemi. Questo per diverse ragioni. Il primo motivo è che non mi sento molto inclusa nell'aver definito QUALI siano questi problemi. C'è una tendenza a scaricare le responsabilità sull'altro che non aiuta il gruppo a rendersi conto anche delle proprie responsabilità individuali. E, di conseguenza, c'è una difficoltà nell'impegnarsi a lavorare per risolvere i problemi_ perché i problemi sono ambigui e non collettivamente definiti.
Poi c'è la fretta. Spesso mi sono sentita come un "acceleratore" della costruzione di un gruppo. Come se la mia presenza, di per sé, potesse cambiare di botto ogni cosa. Purtroppo, non è così. C'è sempre la sindrome del ~~cav~~ designer sul cavallo bianco, e l'atteggiamento degli altri rinforza questa maniera di vedermi. Cosa faccio io per rinforzarla? Mi trovo nella difficoltà di dover far capire che io non ho LA soluzione, non ho nemmeno bene il problema. Ma forse una comprensione di cosa sta succedendo ce l'ho. Anche ha identificato alcuni sticking points.

It is hard to build projects together, create and pursue a vision of the future in harmony, unless you have some sense of security in your community centre […] it all comes down to relationships and power. What do people get from participating in the community centre project? What subjective, individual needs are being met? Can we meed those while working towards common goals? […]
What are my roles? In my work with the Community Centre, it's hard to tell. There's an ambiguity I find hard to navigate […] I am resistant to be considered a problem solver […] Firstly, I don't feel I was included in defining what these problems are. There's a tendency to dump responsibilities on others, and that doesn't help the group realise what their individual responsibilities are […] problems are ambiguous and not collectively defined. Then there's the urgency. I've often felt like an 'accelerator' of the construction of a group, like my presence can suddenly change things. That's not the case. There's the 'designer on a white horse syndrome', and this general attitude reinforces how I see myself [as a saviour]. What do I do to reinforce this view? It's hard to make it clear that I don't have a solution, I don't even know if I get what the problem is. But maybe I do have an understanding of what is going on. Greta has identified some sticking points, too.

*Figure E.3 Excerpts of my reflections on Partnership building for local action*

I am slowly coming to realise that the world is more entangled and relational than our modernity-bred habits allow us to see and appreciate. The more I realise this, the more I doubt that design will affect real change – at least not in the way it is currently understood and practised. I don't see a clear way I could redirect my work and I don't feel like I am effective at sup-porting shifts with clients or colleagues. It is hard to imagine working as a designer without selling something. A product, yes, or the idea of a solution. Even in this work that brings my attention to relationships and relational dynamics, I wonder: am I positioning myself as an "expert" on rela-tionships in DSI? It's such a designer thing to position oneself like the expert, the hero, the ego-driven genius problem solver.
On the one hand, I worry that design cannot deal with the entangled relationality of the world; on the other, I worry that I am not capable as a designer. I don't know enough. I am not ready. I "don't know how". I don't have the credentials. If I could display a certificate of "relationship builder" on my wall, if I could make it part of my job title... would I feel more secure? More confi-dent? Like I am justified in telling people what to do, because I am qualified, just look at my credentials!
Centering my practice on relationships requires pushing back on a lot of views of DSI that are quite toxic. How can I do that when I feel them taking so much space inside of me, in my practice? And how would I go about pushing back on toxic approaches and methods and proposing another way? There is no elevator pitch for this kind of work. I wrote a piece called "Dedicated to those who ask me what my job is" and I sent it to a designer friend. She sent it to her mother. I sent it to my mother. She said, "now whenever my friends ask me what you do, I'll just send them this blog post". That's good, that's a start. I'm so tired of saying "I'm a designer", and be asked "Oh, designer of what?"
But maybe I am meant to be tired. I am meant to be confused. I know others are and sharing is comforting. My chats with are helpful. Meeting for every Thursday has been a key ritual. It has become a comforting habit, like going to mass, I guess. I've never been to mass, but meeting up every week and spending inten-tional time with others to give and receive support is just that – a comforting ritual. I've been discussing this with a lot in separate calls.
What's most interesting is that even when we are not practicing with a specific tool, we are in a relational space, and thus, relationality happens. I think "it" happens most when we are not trying with whatever tool or method – when we clear some space for it to emerge. But, of course, we know what we are there for. We are intentional in our being relational. When we come together to practice, we bring all our paradoxes and our discomfort, our tiredness and confusion, and we make sense of it. It's a practice of coming to terms with our contradictions.

*Figure E.4 Reflections on my practice after a conversation with the Practice Group and with Nora*

I am slowly coming to realise that the world is more entangled and relational than our modernity-bred habits allow us to see and appreciate. The more I realise this, the more I doubt that design will affect real change – at least not in the way it is currently understood and practised. I don't see a clear way I could redirect my work and I don't feel like I am effective at supporting shifts with clients or colleagues. It is hard to imagine working as a designer without selling something. A product, yes, or the idea of a solution. Even in this work that brings my attention to relationships and relational dynamics, I wonder: am I positioning myself as an 'expert' on relationships in DSI? Its' such a designer thing to do, to position oneself like the expert, the hero, the ego-driven genius problem solver. On the one hand, I worry that design cannot deal with the entangled relationality of the world; on the other, I worry that I am not capable as a designer. I don't know enough, I am not ready. I 'don't know how'. I don't have the credentials. If I could display a certificate of 'relationship builder' on my wall, if I could make it part of my job title… would I feel more secure? More confident? Like I am justified in telling people what to do, because I am qualified, just look at my credentials!
Centring my practice on relationships requires pushing back on a lot of views of DSI that are quite toxic. How can I do that when I feel them taking so much space inside of me, in my practice? And how would I go about pushing back on toxic approaches and methods and proposing another way? There is no elevator pitch for this kind of work. I wrote a piece called 'Dedicated to those who ask me what my job is' and I sent it to a designer friend. She sent it to her mother. I sent it to my mother. She said, "now whenever my friends ask me what you do, I'll just send them this blog post". That's good, that's a start. I'm so tired of saying, "I'm a designer", and be asked "Oh, designer of what?" But maybe I am meant to be tired. I am meant to be confused. I know others are and sharing is comforting. My chats with [Nora] are helpful. Meeting for [the Practice Group] every Thursday has been a key ritual. It has become a comforting habit, like going to mass, I guess. I've never been to mass, but meeting up every week and spending intentional time with others to give and receive support is just that – a comforting ritual. I've been discussing this with [Nora] a lot in separate calls. What's most interesting is that even when we are not practicing with a specific tool, we are in a relational space and thus relationality happens. I think 'it' happens most when we are not trying with whatever tool or method – when we clear some space for it to emerge. But, of course, we know what we are there for. We are intentional in our being relational. When we come together to practice, we bring all our paradoxes and our discomfort, our tiredness and confusion, and we make sense of it.

## Appendix F Evocative autoethnography examples

The following is an excerpt of evocative autoethnography used to reconstruct the beginning of the *Building belonging in schools* project.

> *I climb the stairs of the training centre two by two and, panting, I enter the hall. "Hello, I'm here for… the meeting…"*
> *"It's in that room," says the woman behind the front desk, "but you have to sign in first". I scribble my name, organisation and contact details at the bottom of a long list and hurry to the door.*
>
> *The meeting room is large and stuffy. Fifty people are seated in a semi-circle in front of Dario. They are middle school teachers, educators, psychologists, social workers. Behind Dario is a white wall; beside him, a stack of paper and a bucket of black markers. "The project will be financed by ***, a social enterprise," I hear him say as I clumsily take off my coat, "We are just collecting ideas today, but if we win the tender, the Training Centre would lead the consortium and your schools and organisations would be project partners". I take a seat next to a blonde girl and a tall, grey-haired man.*
>
> *"Now, we will start by exploring the central theme of the call for proposals together. I remind you, the project focuses on preventing early school-leaving and promotes the development of partnerships between schools and other organisations in the province". Dario sticks a sheet of paper on the wall. It bears a question written in big, black letters:*
>
> *WHAT CONCRETE ACTIVITIES CAN WE DEVELOP INTO A PROJECT THAT RESPONDS TO THE CALL FOR PROPOSALS?*
>
> *Dario encourages us to reflect upon the question on our own for five minutes, then pairs us up and asks us to discuss. I recognise the beginning of this facilitation technique from his latest book; I have a copy at home, a gift from the author himself.*
>
> *As the workshop continues, Dario's speech and movements become more pacey. He is keeping the attention up, collecting papers from the groups, sticking them to the wall, rearranging them into themes. He gives the floor to members of the audience for small presentations of their contribution, gracefully interrupting them when they dwell too much on the topic. Two hours simply fly by.*
>
> *Dario points at the wall now covered in papers arranged in columns. Each column bears a title at the top, written with a red marker. "As you can see," he sums up, "we now have a framework to write the proposal. Sure, it still*

*needs a lot of work and more input from all partners, but this is a great starting point. Thank you for coming today. The next steps are…"*

Through following excerpt of evocative autoethnography, I reconstructed how I came into this research project and my attitude towards popular design methods and tools at the beginning of my research:

*So, what do you do?*
*I'm a designer. These words mean something to me, something that is deeply connected to my identity. Partially it's about being creative – I like to think of myself as a creative person. But it's not just creativity – it is a creativity that makes sense of things. Design allows me to still be that child that incessantly asks 'why?' just because she wants to make sense of it all. Design education, however, only fed my disappointment with design. I perceived it as an ensemble of experiences, theories, conversations, trends, processes that formed a culture and a taste dictating what design is and how it should work. Design school felt like someone was trying to persuade me, convince me, force me even, to espouse a specific view of design. My desire to ask questions, to transcend those boundaries was dismissed as too idealistic.*

*The work I was encouraged to do as a designer did not match the work that I thought needed to be done. Sometimes it felt the opposite – like I was actively contributing to make everything around me useless, unhappy, traumatised – a feeling I later on learned to recognise as the consequence of defuturing acts (Fry, 2011). Designing for a number, for a bunch of faceless people, for a decontextualised 'context', with a depoliticised approach – all acts that were encouraged by school and employers – felt cold, lonely, and pointless.*

*I might be describing my disillusionment as if it happened in a linear fashion: it didn't. I did not have a moment of realisation where my perception suddenly shifted. Instead, I spent a long time in discomfort, undecided about what I should do with my profession. Through volunteering and then through paid work, I'd acquired a little experience in working with cooperatives and non-profit organisations designing and delivering social projects. Fellow designers often treated me as if what I was doing was not 'actual design', or as if my refusal to join a corporate environment was naïve. I decided to continue studying and gain more knowledge about the non-profit sector in Italy. My peers' comments had gotten to me: I thought that, if I weren't to become an 'actual designer', at least I could put my design skills to better use. The masters gave me more space and time to explore the intersection between design and social innovation; I came across the tools of design studios like IDEO and frogdesign aimed at tackling social issues with a 'design thinking approach'. Toolkits, neatly* *laid out methodologies and step-by-step processes were fascinating and comforting. They were the demonstration design could engage with social issues and bring about 'positive social change'. In fact, designers could contribute to make the process of social innovation orderly, approachable, simpler, by applying a set of tools and techniques to 'wicked problems'. The 'design thinking' approach also felt comfortable in that it took away just the right amount of responsibility. Designing in a 'human-centred' way, I surely couldn't exclude anyone from the process, right? Everyone is human! Designing for 'personas' made sure the people I was designing for were not too faceless. And whenever a participatory component was involved, all the better! I had a comfortable set of tools to handle a participatory workshop, to make sure everything would fall neatly into place.*

*Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that all the models, the tools, the methods, while giving me a warm and fuzzy feeling of comfort, control, and familiarity, were doing very little in terms of putting me in the conditions of addressing the issues I faced in my work. They acted like anchors, or life buoys: they prevented me from drifting away or sinking in uncertainty, while reassuring me that uncertainty, ambiguity are ok. However, the tool themselves didn't do much in terms of moving things forward.*

*They encouraged me to 'empathise'. "Human-centred design is premised on empathy, on the idea that the people you're designing for are your roadmap to innovative solutions. All you have to do is empathise, understand them, and bring them along with you in the design process", says IDEO's guide to HCD. They make it sound so easy! Thank goodness, I just have to empathise. But what is empathy, anyway? As I mulled on the topic, it came up in conversation with my parents; as psychoanalysts, I imagined they would have something valuable to say on empathy.*

*"If complete empathy were possible, our work would be much easier," my father commented. "Of course, you try to understand, to relate… but psychoanalysts should not claim to be able to 'empathise' as if it were a skill."*
*"Yeah, perhaps neither should designers," I added.*
*Bolognini's writings on the "task-claim of empathising" in psychoanalysis* (2002, p. 144), *found as I sifted the library with my mother, further fueled my suspicion of empathy as a skill, as an attitude, or as an instrument.*

# Appendix G Link to video presentation

The video presentation given to participants during the review of the first version of the Framework for Relational Literacy can be accessed at the following links:

- English version: https://youtu.be/Pxkt8Yh7eWc
- Italian version: https://youtu.be/p4DpAostf3w

# Appendix H DRS2020 conference paper

DRS2020
BRISBANE, 11–14 AUG
SYNERGY

## Mutuality and reciprocity: foregrounding relationships in Design and Social Innovation

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**Abstract:**
Although the importance of interpersonal relationships to processes of design and social innovation (D&SI) has been acknowledged, there is limited research in identifying what constitutes a relational approach in D&SI. In spite of their importance for relationship formation and maintenance, questions of respect, reciprocity, power and trust –and their intersection with various cultural practices– are often left untouched in design discourse. This paper reports early findings from interviews with design and social innovation practitioners in the Asia Pacific region, detailing the significance of putting relationships first, establishing mutuality and building reciprocity. The paper contributes insights into how practitioners perceive relationships as both meaningful and essential and suggest areas for further research to develop a more nuanced understanding of relationships in D&SI.

**Keywords**: design and social innovation, relationships, mutuality, reciprocity

## 1. Design and social innovation: a relational practice

Social innovation processes can be described as starting with a more or less serendipitous emergence of actors who share common or relatable issues; these actors go through the negotiation or definition of shared goals, elaborate ideas and solutions, and eventually implement and systematise them (Zapf, 1991; Mumford, 2002; Mulgan, 2007; Heiskala & Hämäläinen, 2007; Pol & Ville, 2008; Franz, Hochgerner, & Howaldt, 2012; Manzini, 2015; Akama & Yee, 2016). Often, the resulting innovation is not a material object, but a social interaction or practice (Choi & Majumdar, 2015). Therefore, social innovation creates new relationships (Mulgan, 2007) but also stems from relationships: relationships can be considered both the precondition and the result of social innovation.

In this context, designers can "play a strong and relevant, even leading role" (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011, p. 202) triggering new collaborations, facilitating conversations, strategically connecting local initiatives and people. Recent literature suggests that the formation of relationships is a phenomenon that professional designers embed in the design process and is therefore within their agency and responsibility (Dindler & Iversen, 2014, p. 43); however, the processes through which relationships are built in design projects are not always made explicit in research accounts. A large part of the work aimed at forming, nurturing and consolidating relationships is done in the "backstage" of the design process (Dindler & Iversen, 2014) in the form of one-to-one conversations, asynchronous work such as email or text message exchange, and even personal reflection; these activities are usually considered a by-product of design compared to "front stage" activities such as workshops or presentations, but they are a fundamental element of relationship formation in a design context.

Current explanations of how people come together to initiate and sustain social innovation processes – particularly the definition of "collaborative organisations" offered by Manzini (2015, p. 83), with its emphasis on independence and free will to join and leave the process – resonate with Western ways of thinking but do not offer an account of the value of intimate, interdependent relationships in design and social innovation (Akama & Yee, 2016). The literature foregrounding relationality in design and social innovation (D&SI) often comes from a non-Western or Global South context. For example, Akama and Yee (2016) invoke the framework proposed by Kasulis (2002) to explain traditional design's tendency to present itself as objective and universally adaptable. In his book *Intimacy or Integrity,* Kasulis presents two fundamentally different ways of relating: although a society is rarely "culturally monolithic", it may have a mainstream system of thought that values intimacy over integrity, or vice versa (Kasulis 2002, p.17). The integrity orientation poses an emphasis on public objectivity, independence and external relations, while the intimacy orientation tends to favour belong-togetherness, interdependence and internal relations. In an integrity paradigm, knowledge (including design knowledge) is viewed as independent from context, universal, and transferrable. The knower is assumed as separate from the design knowledge, with models and tools as a bridge between them. An intimacy paradigm, on the other hand, perceives knowledge as embodied, inseparable from its context, and only transferrable through relationships and situated practice. However, it is unclear what these terms actually mean in the lived experience of people working in D&SI projects, and what their significance would be for designers in the development of a relational approach to D&SI.

This paper aims to elaborate on aspects of relationships as discussed by design and social innovation practitioners in Asia Pacific. It describes the preliminary findings of an exploratory qualitative study, conducted as part of a PhD study which aims to explore what role relationships and relationality have within D&SI. The paper reports on early thematic analysis of interviews with 12 practitioners who detail the significance of putting relationships first, establishing mutuality and building reciprocity. These themes describe important features of professional design practice focused on social impact and change that are rarely discussed in D&SI literature. The paper contributes further insights into how design practitioners perceive relationships as both meaningful and essential to the work of design and social innovation and suggests how future work can build on these perspectives.

## 2. Relationships, design and social innovation

### *2.1 Defining relationships*

Since current literature directly relevant to relationships in design and social innovation is scarce, the study draws from research in other fields such as Relationship Science (Berscheid, 1999), Leader-Member Exchange (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), Employee-Organisation Relationship (EOR; Shore et al., 2004), and research on social networks and social capital (Claridge, 2018; Granovetter, 1973) to identify the different factors at play in building and maintaining work relationships. The research focuses on dyadic relationships (those happening between two individuals) which are considered the "key element or building block of groups" and "represent key components of social networks" (Liden, Anand, & Vidyarthi, 2016, p. 140).

Ferris et al. (2009) offer a review of the literature and propose an integrative model of work relationships. The authors describe initial interactions as characterised by instrumentality. The quality of the relationship depends on the expectation that each participant in the dyad holds and might be influenced by each participant's interest in establishing or maintaining an important role within the organisation. Trust, respect, affect and support play an important part in forming a judgement about the other participant (Pratt & Dirks, 2007; Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995 as cited in Ferris et al., 2009). The relationship can remain 'low-quality' and instrumental, or it can evolve so that participants start to see it not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005 as cited in Ferris et al., 2009). Flexibility is required to handle incompatibility and disagreement, with each participant needing to show the ability to compromise and negotiate (Ferris et al., 2009). As the reciprocal commitment grows, the need to maintain a shared relational identity increases, with loyalty, commitment and accountability playing a key role (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Other elements characterising relationships are the passing of time; physical and psychological distance; reputation; and dissolution or redefinition of the relationship.

### *2.2 Cultural plurality in relational D&SI*

Processes of design and social innovation are centred upon creating dialogue and surfacing the perspectives of a heterogenous group of people with varying relationships, with the goal of enhancing its capacity to act. However, some scholars doubt that traditional design education and training stimulate the designers' awareness of questions such as power, decision making, responsibility and reciprocity, which are central to relationship formation and maintenance within and outside of design processes (Akama, Hagen, & Whaanga-Schollum, 2019). Exploring relational approaches to D&SI requires welcoming the idea that people – design professionals, laymen, communities – engage in design activity in a plurality of ways that cannot be disentangled from their social, cultural, economic and physical context. The plurality of ways of understanding and doing design is increasingly discussed in academia, as demonstrated by the rising numbers of books, papers and conferences on the matter. For example, the Design Research Society (DRS) has introduced a Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group which aspires to a "'re-orientation' of design to incorporate multiple perspectives and views and a focus on multiple ways of doing and understanding design" (DRS, n.d.); the discourse around design "decolonization" is surfacing often marginalised design practices from non-Western cultures (see for example the work by the Decolonising Design Group, 2016; Tunstall, 2013; Akama and Yee, 2016; some academics and practitioners are problematizing aspects of design that are normally taken for granted and foregrounding respect, reciprocity and relationality over, for example, replicability (Akama, Hagen & Whaanga-Schollum, 2019), while others urge us to embrace plurality as "grounded, situated, self-reflexive and ever evolving" (Light, 2019, p. 4).

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1 A note on positionality*

We acknowledge that reflexivity is a key aspect of relational D&SI. As co-authors we identify as design practitioners and researchers with differing cultural experiences to bring to the inquiry. All three authors have been trained in fairly traditional Anglo-European art and design education and we acknowledge our educational and professional background will therefore influence our approach and critical lens we bring to the research. Therefore, we feel it is important for us to a) to provide a brief account of our background and our practices and b) to reflect on how we critically engage with accounts that come from non-western cultures. The first author, Viola has practiced predominately in Italy and in the UK, but spent 6 months working with an Indonesia-based organisation on a series of public space projects funded by the United Nations. It was this project that initially raised questions on the role of relationships in D&SI practice. Her unfamiliarity of the Indonesian language encouraged her instead to observe and notice how relationships between the project team and the different stakeholders (from villagers to high-ranking government officials) were initiated and nurtured throughout and beyond the project. These connections seemed to enable projects to happen, they sustained them, were cultivated long before the start of the projects and long after their completion. Similarly, the second and third authors also have extensive experience of investigating, observing and being part of cross-cultural design projects where relationships are considered to be vital. The second author, Joyce co-founded the Designing Social Innovation in Asia-Pacific (DESIAP) in response to a growing trend in the appropriation of 'universal' Anglo-centric design methods in different cultural contexts which may inadvertently dislodge indigenous practices and knowledge. Her attunement to cultural nuances and appropriation has been shaped by her background growing up in post-independence Malaysia, as an ethnic Chinese in a Muslim dominated country, and as an Asian woman living and working in a dominant group in the UK. The third author, Rachel has a background in participatory arts in refugee contexts predominantly in the UK. More recently she has been working with Arabic communities in Palestine and has established a network with international researchers working across the middle east and north Africa, exploring decolonizing participatory design practices in the context of indigenous place-based knowledges.

Our professional experiences attests to designing as a deeply relational practice; however, the variety of frameworks, toolkits and models available to designers (e.g. Frogdesign, 2012; IDEO, 2015) made little to no mention of the complexity of relationships and of their intersections with D&SI. Therefore, we started to reflect on and explore the role of relationships through Viola's own practice, which has become a core focus of her PhD with support from Joyce and Rachel. Part of the reflexive practice process also includes drawing on experiences and examples from other D&SI practitioners working in different cultural contexts in order to enrich understandings of D&SI, while also using the variety of perspectives and cultural nuances to surface attitudes and values that may be assumed as universal in design discourse. The following section describes how these different experiences and perspectives were elicited and analysed.

### *3.2 Semi-structured interviews and analysis*

The findings presented in this paper are initial results based on data collected during semi-structured interviews with 12 practitioners in 10 organisations from different countries in the Asia Pacific region. Participants were interviewed through a VOIP (voice over IP) call through Skype or Zoom, with each conversation lasting between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 30 minutes depending on the availability of the interviewee and on the time spent in introductions and informal chat. The conversations were loosely based on an interview guide that Viola shared with participants prior to the interview; after transcription, a Thematic Analysis approach was adopted to analyse the data and draw initial insights. At this stage of the research, we were focused on capturing practitioners' view on relationality in their practice that spoke to their experience. We did not assume that they had the right or permission to speak on behalf of the indigenous perspectives of the community that they work with.

### *3.3 Sampling strategy*

The sampling of D&SI practitioners began with the construction of a database of potential contacts who could offer a non-Western perspective on design and social innovation. The selection was based on the following criteria:

- Expertise of the interviewee in the social innovation field;
- Perceived interest in the questions guiding this research;

- Likelihood that the interviewee would have an approach to their work that emphasises the importance of relationships;
- A position in the organisation to initiate and build relationships;
- Previous contact, or possibility of being introduced.

Through a partnership with the DESIAP network, we were able to access a database of contacts to whom we could be introduced and who could offer a non-Western perspective on design and social innovation. Most of the contacts were collected from this database, with the exception of two people which was recruited from Viola's professional contacts. Participants work in different countries: Aotearoa New Zealand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Thailand. Below is the list of participants with their related role and context of work; their names were replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

*Table 1 List of participants.*

| Name (pseudonym) | Professional role | Scope of organisation / project / activity |
|---|---|---|
| Anne | Director of Philanthropy | Grant-making foundation |
| Thomas | Executive creative director | Design and branding studio working with social innovation initiatives |
| Gloria | Executive director | Social innovation project within an academic and research institution |
| Victor | Co-founder | Social enterprise incubator (1) |
| Carlo | Co-founder | Social enterprise incubator (2) |
| Rose | Venture support director | Social enterprise incubator (2) |
| Lamai | Co-founder | Social innovation design consultancy |
| Lucy | Co-design lead | Government-led project |
| Leon | Co-founder | Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives |
| Alba | Co-founder | Organisational design consultancy working with social innovation initiatives |
| Keiko | Co-founder and managing director | Company collaborating with government to create social innovation ecosystems |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Somchai | University lecturer | Working on social innovation projects with students |

### 3.4 Thematic Analysis

Since the goal of the research is to develop a deeper understanding of relational dynamics through rich descriptions and the exposure of taken-for-granted assumptions, a phenomenological approach to research (Spencer, Pryce, & Walsh, 2014) paired with Thematic Analysis seemed fitting. The "reflexive TA approach" proposed by Braun and Clarke (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) was adopted. It conceptualises TA as a wholly qualitative approach that emphasises situated, contextual meaning, with the researcher having an active role in the production of meaning and knowledge. Initially, inductive coding was performed manually; after turning to the literature to develop and refine the codes and the main concepts, a well-known qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo was used to sort the codes and explore particular themes.

## 4. Discussion: relationships come first

All participants identified relationships as central to their work. Three participants explicitly mentioned having a specific relationship-building mandate as part of their formal role in their organisation, while others described building relationships as a priority in their work. The approach to relationships varied, with some participants acknowledging an underlying goal to building relationships, such as opening up opportunities for collaboration or acquiring support and resources. Others foregrounded relationships and framed projects as their consequence: "It's like relationships come first. [...] the outcome of what you do when you are together, that comes later" (Alba). In all cases, participants related a positive perception of relationships built before and during the project to an overall positive perception of the project activities and outcomes.

Different features of relationships were identified in the interviews, along with several strategies to build and maintain relationships, establish and expand networks of relationships, deal with challenges and overcome obstacles. In this brief space, two themes are identified as fundamental to describing positive, vibrant work relationships in the context of D&SI: establishing mutuality and building reciprocity.

### 4.1 Establishing mutuality

We define mutuality here as the extent of agreement between the dyadic parties about the nature of their relationship and its specific terms (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). It implies a 'respective' relationship in which certain actions are performed by two people with respect to one another (Graumann, 1995). Mutuality was identified as an important concept that D&SI practitioners consistently described in their work; it is underpinned and enacted by and through core features of trust, role-taking and learning.

**Mutual trust**

Supporting the findings of previous research (Bratteteig, Bødker, Dittrich, Mogensen, & Simonsen, 2012; Clarke et al., 2019; Pirinen, 2016; Warwick, 2017), mutual trust among members of the same organisation and among project partners at all levels, from government to community, is considered valuable in collaborative design practice. In the participants' words, trust is "the core of everything we do" (Anne) and "[t]here should be a certain amount of trust before we even start the work" (Thomas). While trust building as described by participants relies on reciprocity and is therefore discussed in the next section, participants stressed the mutuality of trust in that they felt it "works both ways" (Anne): it has to be mutual to enable the construction of equal partnerships and allow transparency in communication and the open sharing of issues and problems. These elements generate a positive feedback loop that reinforces mutual trust building over time.

**Role-taking and mutual expectations**

References to mutuality also highlighted anticipated obligations associated with role-taking and expectations of what each party would bring to the relationship. Showing consistency in fulfilling obligations and conforming to the other party's expectations was reported to increase trust: "there has to be, to a certain extent, predictability, which means you don't change all the time" (Thomas). However, practitioners discussed the need to balance and integrate different roles – and therefore different obligations and expectations – including being a trusted advisor, a facilitator of conversations and co-design activities, a critical friend and "thought partner" (Anne), a member of the community or an outsider, a connector with other people, with resources or knowledge, and a host of events. These informal roles were described as overlapping with more consistent, formal ones such as funder, design consultant, professor, trainer, or representative of local government.

Anne is a director of philanthropy, but her roles go well beyond distributing funds to different projects:

> *"The money of course is vital, but it's much more about we then becoming a connector and actually often just a friend to have a glass of wine with and have someone to say 'Oh my gosh, I'm really struggling with this.'" (Anne)*

While deep, trusting relationships can generate and sustain projects, failing to balance different roles can generate contrasting expectations or even conflict:

> *"They invite me to join [a community event]. I cannot refuse that I am from uni[versity], I'm pretty well known in [country]. But I try to be my own individual representing my own [self]. I'm not trying to be like, "Okay, I'm the lecturer and I'm knowledgeable about this and I want these people to do this and that." (Somchai)*
>
> *"[A]t the beginning of the project, even though I try so hard to be friendly with everyone, to be close, connect to the one I think would be a good key informant for me, I need to be aware that maybe I need to keep some distance, because I come from outside anyway. If there are conflicts in the community and it seems that I am pro this guy, maybe I will not get any help from them. So that's why it's so hard for me to balance my roles in the communities." (Somchai)*

Roles taken are also influenced by power dynamics where the ability of one party to have power over the other and exert some control over its behaviour, including imposing obligations, occurs (Fasli, 2006). Participants have reported experiencing power imbalances, particularly in teacher-learner or funder-grantee relationships or in interactions with members of disenfranchised communities. Trying to establish mutual relationships in D&SI can therefore challenge this dynamic. While assuming 'equal' agency and providing tools for participation without questioning the quality and nature of engagement can reproduce imbalanced power structures (Pierri, 2016), deconstructing power dynamics has its challenges, particularly in contexts and cultures where social hierarchy is firmly rooted in the society and open disagreement is undesirable (see for example Tjahja & Yee, 2017). One participant from Thailand commented:

> *"[I]n Thailand, because it's very relationships based, when someone disagrees, they wouldn't say it in the meeting [...] you need to respect the elders. You can't say, you know, you can't really express how you feel."*

Another participant, who is originally European and has worked in D&SI in Myanmar and Indonesia, offered a counterview:

> *"[P]eople sometimes see you as this this person who knows some stuff and then they kind of more or less automatically trust you [...] people just listen to you and don't question what you tell them [...] This changes the dynamics of some relationships."*

Consistently with Sluss & Ashworth (2007), the ways roles occupants enact their respective roles in regard to each other (i.e. 'relational identity') are fluid: they integrate personal qualities and role-based characteristics (including authority), and they are socially constructed through interaction, observation, negotiation, and feedback. A mutual understanding of respective roles facilitates the construction of a positive work relationship, but when the construction of a shared relational identity questions the role- and person-based identities that constitute it (for example by challenging one party's authority and the other party's submission to it), parties might resist the change and it might take longer for the relationship to transcend the bounds of the roles.

**Mutual learning**

Enabling mutual learning is one way to encourage the levelling of hierarchy and work towards achieving and maintaining equal partnerships. Two participants who have experience of working alongside Indigenous communities in Aotearoa New Zealand offer a compelling example of how equal partnerships can be created and maintained by following Indigenous cultural protocols that emphasise mutual respect and mutual learning. The process begins by finding common ground, building trust and exploring mutual consent to respectful collaboration:

> *"The first thing you have to do with in Maori culture is whakawhanaungatanga, you have to get to know who's in the room [...] you don't start the work until you've established who you are, where you come from and what your shared values are around".*

*"A wānanga might look like a workshop, but it will be on marae, so it would be on a cultural site and you will follow in practice cultural protocols. So you have to be welcomed onto the site".*

*"[It was] a whole ceremony, which took hours, of being invited, like enthusiastically and genuinely invited onto the land and given permission, given a sense of 'We claim authority on this land and we have some values and some ways of being that are crucial. And if you're willing to adhere to those ways of being, then you can consider yourself as entitled as any other local'".*

After establishing mutual consent and aligning values, the design process continues with a pattern of mutual learning. The Maori term "ako" encapsulates the mutuality of the learning process and the levelling of power: "[T]he design process from Maori lens is very much about ako. Ako means to teach and to learn at the same time. So it's both".

The concept of mutual learning as a way to equalise power relationships is often discussed as a motivation and an outcome of participatory design heritage (Kensing & Greenbaum, 2012, p. 21). In their work on Participatory Design and infrastructuring, Bødker et al. (2017) build on the work of Engeström (2007) to describe "knotworks", fluid assemblies of heterogenous participants working in "symbiotic agreement" through mutually beneficial or explorative partnerships. Knotworks, together with more stable "networks" of relationships, form the infrastructure of a project; relational agency, which is exerted by all stakeholders and dispersed among people and organisations, involves engaging with this infrastructure at various levels of authority, recognizing and respecting the resources and understandings that other people carry.

Indigenous perspectives on PD highlight the importance of "preserv[ing] difference, opposition and division in the knowledge that we all inhabit a living mutualism"(Sheehan, 2011, p. 69). Indigenous knowledge applied to design foregrounds deep situational awareness, respect and care; through an openness to mutual learning, collective well-being can be pursued even from a plurality of positions. As one participant described it, it is about

*"focusing on the quality of the present moment and the lived experience of the subject of individuals that are in the space and like, how are they doing? What needs do they have? Can I adjust my posture in a way that meets their needs more effectively?"*

Far from the heteronomy of universal, standardised design practice, Indigenous perspectives allow for autonomy (Escobar, 2017; Sheehan, 2011) grounded in relational cultural practices and enabling communities to change the norms from within. The difficulties of Western conceptualisations of PD to fully adopt a relational paradigm (exemplified by the tendency to consider relationality as a skill designers bring to the project, rather than as a way of being) are, as notes one participant, "completely resolved within an Indigenous worldview, because those things [are] already settled". Another participant explicitly noted that this approach is key to studies focused on relationship in D&SI: "you've got a research question, and I think the answer is Indigenous approaches to design".

## 4.2 Building reciprocity

The term 'reciprocity' is used here to indicate what Sahlins and Graeber (1965, p. 147) call 'generalised reciprocity': a type of transaction in which one party commits an act of generosity by offering or sharing something (resources, help, hospitality) without expecting a direct, material return. While reciprocity does generate sense of counter-obligation, this is a 'diffuse' obligation to reciprocate when the donor will need it, and if the recipient will be able to reciprocate. The nature and amount of the reciprocation can also be very different from what was initially given.

As mentioned, mutual trust is an essential element to the construction of positive work relationships in D&SI. However, "it doesn't happen overnight" (Anne): time, care and patience are required to build the base for a solid relationship. Participants described different strategies they put in place to gradually build trusting relationships; many of them involved reciprocity or, as Lucy described it, "putting generosity into the system": contributions in the form of economic resources, knowledge, connections, time, emotional availability are made without expecting immediate reciprocation but in the hope that, one day, efforts will be reciprocated. Thomas eloquently describes this process:

> *"[I]f you choose to be the one to trust, to take on the lead to trust certain people, they will trust you in return. I think there's a beauty of humanity that if you take the first step, I'm sure the other side, they will take some steps, maybe slower, but they will take the steps eventually. [...] I always see the return. It may not come directly from the party who has benefited from your program, but it will come back, in some other time."*

Carlo describes this process as being about "creating courage, [...] the courage of really saying, 'Ok, look, we can do something together', right? So now I trust you, and I find the courage of putting it out there". This might require "model[ling]the same behaviours we look for in partners" (Anne) such as showing vulnerability, openly admitting mistakes, or being patient. From this initial demonstration of trust, the relationship is maintained by keeping in touch through text message, meeting up for coffee, offering continuous emotional support, being invited to and attending community events even outside of normal work days, and generally building a personal, more intimate relationship than what would happen in a work setting.

Often, reciprocity involves brokering a relationship with a third person, or welcoming the other party within one's social network. Sharing a contact can be beneficial to a relationship: triads have been studied for decades, demonstrating that dyadic relationships are strengthened if both parties are linked to the same third person (Simmel, 1908/1950; Heider, 1958; Krackhardt & Kilduff, 2002), while more recent research uncovered the importance of social networks on dyadic relationships (Goodwin, Bowler, & Whittington, 2009; Sparrowe & Liden, 2005). Though the relationship is strengthened, Carlo explains that "in the majority of cases, [building relationships] would not be a direct benefit for our company, but it would be, could be, a potential benefit for the entrepreneurs we are supporting, so for the real social innovators." In Gloria's organisation, project partners are introduced through referrals and, for a project to be funded, its proponents must have strong pre-existing connections with the target beneficiaries and must be willing to grant open access to previous knowledge and work results.

Significant amounts of time and money can be put into the development of a work relationship: Anne's foundation distributes early stage grants to, "sort of crudely, [buy] time to build a stronger relationship and get to know each other better as people and organisations"; Lucy comments that, in situations where local government has repeatedly let down communities, "we don't expect there to be a readiness [for innovation] when there's been so much fracture. So we might have to sit in a pre-readiness phase with those communities for a couple of years before [...] there is enough trust or enough stability in the chaos that you can start to work forward".

All this generosity is not selfless: many participants mentioned the need to understand that people have different motivations to enter a relationship and openly shared having a self-interest in relationships. All the reciprocity-based strategies, however, expose them to risks such as potential rejection, loss of face, loss of time or money. Sometimes the risk is of being hurt: "if there was a betrayal of that trust [...] it would be a viscerally personal issue for the team" (Anne). One participant expressed frustration at the "years of maintenance" of relationships that do not lead to any "concrete output or outcome", while others mentioned the risk that the generosity would be taken advantage of, rather than recognised or reciprocated. Finally, some participants mentioned becoming "entangled" in relationships, having to maintain them beyond the end of a project or being held accountable in the long term for the behaviour of people they have introduced.

## 5. Conclusions

The participants stressed the importance of relationships to their work in D&SI and understood themselves as active agents in the creation and maintenance of relational bonds. The practices described by D&SI practitioners are deeply relational that involves collective sensemaking, dialogue, storytelling and knowledge-sharing and is embedded within various cultural practices (Akama, 2017; Akama & Yee, 2016; Escobar, 2017; Salazar & Borrero, 2017). Participants have described openness to others, being present, continuous alignment and attunement to the other's needs and values, a non-transactional approach to reciprocity, and a focus on consent and consensus as elements to build a successful relationship. This suggests further research is needed to acknowledge the plurality of experiences of working in D&SI; and the use of suitable frameworks to notice and reveal the various dimensions relating to establishing mutuality and building reciprocity. For example, here it might be useful to refer to use Kasulis's (2002) framework to further observe mutuality and reciprocity through the lens of cultural practices foregrounding intimacy or integrity.

Our research has revealed that there is limited recognition of indigenous and non-western 'design' practice within accounts of D&SI, and yet this could be of value to invigorating relational understandings of design. It is therefore important to consider these accounts in a critically reflexive and nuanced understanding of positions, accounts and ways of being and operating in D&SI (Akama, Hagen & Whaanga, 2019). Our understanding of D&SI, and what we are able to see and hear however remains influenced by our histories and experiences, despite trying to be respectful of other ways of being in design that does not attempt to appropriate or take on or speak for others, particularly those who have had their cultures and practices denied in violent and oppressive ways. Our understanding and interpretation is therefore always going to be very different from those who have grown up with indigenous ways of being. Therefore, as researchers, we should be mindful of what it means to try and take on these ideas from indigenous cultures as transferrable to different contexts.

Insights from the participants experiences is being used to inform the next stage of the research. Viola will be seeking a deeper engagement with the practitioners and the communities they work through planned field work in order to observe first-hand how the guiding principles of mutuality and reciprocity are being enacted in order to further sensitise her practice in Italy to these elements.

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