

Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

Socio-Psychological Aspects of Grassroots Participation in the Transition Movement: An Italian Case Study

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Abstract

In this article, we present a case study investigating the socio-psychological aspects of grassroots participation in a Transition Town Movement (TTM) community initiative. We analyzed the first Italian Transition initiative: Monteveglio (Bologna), the central hub of the Italian TTM and a key link with the global Transition Network. A qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze the data consisting of interviews with key informants and ethnographic notes. The results provide further evidence supporting the role of social representations, shared social identities, and collective efficacy beliefs in promoting, sustaining, and shaping activists' commitment. The movement seems to have great potential to inspire and engage citizens to tackle climate change at a community level. Grassroots engagement of local communities working together provides the vision and the material starting point for a viable pathway for the changes required. Attempting to ensure their future political relevance, the TTM adherents are striving to disseminate and materially consolidate inherently political and prefigurative movement frames – primarily community resilience and re-localization – within community socio-economic and political frameworks. However, cooperation with politics is perceived by most adherents as a frustrating and dissatisfying experience, and an attempted co-optation of the Transition initiative by institutions. It highlights a tension between the open and non-confrontational approach of the movement towards institutions and their practical experience. Corresponding to this tension, activists have to cope with conflicts, contradictions, and ambivalence of social representations about community action for sustainability, which threaten the sense of collective purpose, group cohesion and ultimately its survival.

Keywords: Transition towns, new environmentalism, collective identity, social representations

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According to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014), urgent action is needed to keep the planet's climate within tolerable levels of warming. Tackling climate change is one of the most urgent challenges of the 21st century, and requires a system-wide transition towards a low-carbon future. The increase in climate change in recent decades has given rise to new organizations and forms of action within the environmental movement, providing new opportunities for local-based activism and grassroots involvement in sustainability (Rootes, 2012). Public engagement and community action have become recurrent features of

carbon-related discourse, corresponding with a growing enthusiasm for such topics within academia, policy, practitioner circles, and environmentalists (Mulugetta, Jackson, & van der Horst, 2010).

Community action has begun to be co-opted, rhetorically at least, into the policy agenda pertaining to climate change mitigation responses. The local community is widely recognized as the primary context in which both active citizens and local institutions can embody sustainability (DEFRA, 2005). It represents the most fertile place for public involvement in carbon reduction activities, offering the opportunity to experiment with social and technological innovations, and to share and cultivate new practices and norms (Heiskanen, Johnson, Robinson, Vadovics, & Saastamoinen, 2010; Smith, Voß, & Grin, 2010).

This enthusiastic view of the potential for grassroots involvement in sustainability assumes that community groups have the potential and capacity to instigate the desired changes in the community, and that they want to be a vehicle of governmental actions (Middlemiss & Parrish, 2010; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Drawing on these premises, we present an exploratory case study based on ethnographic and qualitative methods, investigating the participation within a grassroots initiative for sustainability belonging to the broader Transition Town Movement (TTM). Our findings are discussed in light of the psychosocial literature on participatory processes, and the social movement literature on prefigurative politics.

Introducing Prefigurative Politics

Coined by political theorist Carl Boggs, the term prefigurative politics refers to the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that represent its ultimate goal (Boggs, 1977). The term became popular in the analysis of the 1960s New Left in the United States, comprising a broad range of movements and intellectual currents, which emphasized the presence of multiple forms of oppression in society, including race and gender, and that rejected the bureaucracy and traditional forms of political organization in favour of direct action and participatory democracy (Davis, 2010). Prefigurative politics has been described as “the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics” (Breines, 1989, p. 6), involving a set of additional and/or alternative goals and activities to the political mobilization (Breines, 1989; Epstein, 1991). These alternative goals and activities aspired to promote a cultural shift towards the construction of community and horizontal and egalitarian relationships, taking seriously ‘the personal as political’ standpoint promoted by the women’s liberation movement (Breines, 1989).

Breines (1980) counterposes the prefigurative politics to strategic politics, interpreting them as two different and competing forms of social movements’ activity for bringing about political, economic and social change. Prefigurative politics refers to a mode of organization and strategies adopted by a group that reflect the society that the group wishes to create (Graeber, 2009). In this sense, prefigurative politics is based on the principle of directly implementing the desired changes, rather than asking others to make the changes on one’s behalf (Leach, 2013). Strategic politics, on the other side, is “committed to building organizations in order to achieve power so that structural changes in the political, economic and social orders might be achieved” (Breines, 1980, p. 422).

As explained by Polletta (2002), “the label prefigurative has remained popular as a way to describe movement groups whose internal structure is characterized by a minimal division of labour, decentralized authority, and an egalitarian ethos and whose decision-making is direct and consensus oriented” (p. 6). The concept has been the subject of an ongoing debate among social movement scholars, who question whether prefiguration should be considered a way of carrying out mobilization; a form of collective action and experimentation; new forms of

activities that try to anticipate or enact some features of an alternative and better world in the present; or a combination of these (Graeber, 2009; Leach, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Yates, 2015a).

According to Juris (2008), the strategy-prefiguration dichotomy remains an issue alive in social movement practice. Activists have to integrate strategy and prefiguration and strike a balance between their prefigurative practices and orientation and their more instrumental goals. Maeckelbergh (2011) rejects this opposition between prefigurative politics and instrumental forms of social movement activity, arguing that prefiguration and strategy are not mutually exclusive. She maintains that prefiguration is inherently strategic, referring to the process of actively setting up alternative and counter-hegemonic institutions, which are meant to replace existing political structures. These also provide a space where individuals can experience in a direct way anti-hierarchical values, egalitarian relationships, and different power relations.

The example of prefiguration most frequently reported is the use of consensus and other direct democracy mechanisms, which aim to encourage egalitarian decision-making and cooperation among groups involved in collective action (Maeckelbergh, 2009, 2011). The contemporary global movements seem to confirm and reconfirm their participatory practices as prefigurative politics (Polletta, 2002). Further, participatory forms of self-governance assume a prefigurative role as a “school of democracy”, developing and enacting the desired transformation of social and organizational life (Della Porta, 2009, p. 266).

According to Yates (2015a), what differentiates prefigurative groups from sub-cultural and counter-cultural ones is the activists’ recognition of the intrinsic political nature and aims of their action. Yates (2015a) outlines principles of prefiguration by making reference to new social movements’ orientation, which combines the imaginative construction of alternatives, within either mobilisation-related or everyday activities, with some strategic attempt to ensure their future political relevance. It does this through five interrelated social processes:

- I. Collective experimentation, which takes place in political mobilisation and also in relation to everyday practices and projects;
- II. The circulation of political meanings that prefigurative groups host and develop as a critique of political perspectives, ideas, and social movement frames;
- III. The production and establishment of new collective norms and conduct;
- IV. The material consolidation of political messages, symbols and codes of conduct;
- V. The demonstration and dissemination of practices and perspectives to allow prefigured alternatives to persist beyond the present and the group (Yates, 2015a, pp. 13-15).

Prefigurative movements are described as less focused on political reform, legislative changes or revolution than on establishing more equal, peaceful, ecological societies (Yates, 2015b) through “disengagement and reconstruction” (Day, 2011, p. 111).

Whereas the clarification proposed by Yates (2015a) seems satisfactory in rethinking the prefigurative orientation of contemporary social movements, considerable reflections remain to be made and could benefit from the social psychology literature on group dynamics and participatory processes. The psychosocial aspects of movements are crucial as they attempt to mature and spread into wider public arenas. Questions of how collective identity is built, negotiated and preserved, how group cohesion is fostered and built, how shared meanings and the sense of collective purpose are produced and maintained, are all critical dimensions for ongoing participation and com-

mitment. With regard to those prefigurative groups engaged in addressing climate change, additional questions arise. Considering the scale and urgency of the climate threat – which requires immediate actions and achievements – we question whether it is possible and appropriate to talk about ‘disengagement’ from conventional politics and what forms it can assume. Therefore, following the reasoning of [Juris \(2008\)](#), we question how different representations and priorities, within individuals and the collective, are aligned, balanced and managed, and what role they have in maintaining group cohesion, the sense of collective purpose, and the ongoing commitment, and in shaping relationships and cooperation with external actors.

The Transition Town Movement

The Transition Town Movement (TTM), also known as the Transition Movement or Transition Network, is a recent and rapidly growing civil society movement built around the idea of developing community-based responses to address the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil ([Hopkins, 2008](#)).

The prefigurative orientation of TTM is represented by the imaginative and concrete attempts to construct a low-carbon, liveable future, generating, arguing and prefiguring a concept of prosperity detached from economic growth ([North & Longhurst, 2013](#)). The movement is highly decentralized and consists of a network of activists and organizations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainability, with each community initiative being responsible for finding its own sustainability path and responding to the local situation ([Seyfang & Smith, 2007](#)). The idea of TTM is based on the principle of ‘think global, act local’, focusing on a politics of community-led experimentation and bottom-up institution building ([Bailey, Hopkins, & Wilson, 2010](#)), through an inclusive process based on legitimation, consensus, and self-governance of local initiatives ([Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012](#)).

The Transition Movement has been framed within the new environmentalism ([Hershkowitz, 2002](#); [Speth, 2008](#)), which covers all those movements and activities guided by the belief that the strengthening of the local is one of the key drivers of potential change toward sustainability. New environmentalism encourages citizens, politicians, environmental specialists, and business people to work together to identify appropriate measures and take action to address environmental issues at a community scale ([Connors & McDonald, 2011](#)). The TTM is also characterized by a pragmatic approach as it stresses the importance of practical activities (e.g., renewable energy facilities, local food provision, local currencies), which can lead to tangible sustainability outcomes in communities and encourage citizens to get involved ([Hopkins, 2008](#)).

While the TTM incorporates aspects regarding both community development and social movements, it differs from both of these because of its declared apolitical nature and identity ([Connors & McDonald, 2011](#)). Rather, the movement is described as a spontaneous expression of civil society, working through sub-politics ([Hopkins, 2008](#)), and drawing on citizens who do not perceive themselves as activists ([Mason & Whitehead, 2012](#)).

A particularity about the TTM lies in its choice of cultivating constructive relationships with local authorities rather than of inciting conflicts or friction. Several authors ([Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012](#); [Chatterton & Cutler, 2008](#); [Haxeltine & Seyfang, 2009](#); [Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010](#)) have criticized the choice of avoiding political confrontation and deliberately embracing an apolitical approach, questioning how far Transition initiatives can get within any socio-political framework. Refusing to take a confrontational position and maintaining positive links with local governments are identified as risks rendering the movement irrelevant and/or vulnerable to being co-opted by political institutions ([Chatterton & Cutler, 2008](#)).

The Case Study

This research article focuses on an exploratory case study concerning Monteveglio, a small community located in northern Italy and selected for three important reasons: it is the first initiative, catalyst and landmark of the TTM in Italy; it is the key link with the global network; and it is “the most striking example of transition thinking adopted by a local authority”.ⁱ In fact, the city council signed a deliberation formally declaring Monteveglio the first Transition Town (TT) in Italy. The main activities carried out at Monteveglio include raising citizens’ awareness on climate change, resource depletion and related issues, encouraging the adoption of pro-environmental behaviours, and promoting participation in sustainable community activities. The practical activities refer specifically to local-based agriculture, involving community gardening and social farming, collective sustainable energy actions carried out and managed conjointly by the TT advocates and the city administration (e.g., purchasing groups, domestic energy consumption detection), and sustainability education lessons/workshops at the local schools through joint efforts of TT groups, the municipality, and the Environmental Education Center.

Methods

Data Corpus

The study was conducted using data collected directly by the research team from:

- 200 hours of ethnographic observations (gathering textual notes) of community activities during the months from May to July 2013 (e.g., internal group meetings and public events organized by TT members);
- 10 semi-structured recorded interviews with key informants (see [Table 1](#));
- 3 web-sites of:ⁱⁱ the Monteveglio Municipality; the union of five municipalities (Valsamoggia) to which Monteveglio belongs; and the ENESCOMⁱⁱⁱ project;
- 2 blogs:^{iv} the ‘Transition Italia’ national hub and the blog of ‘Monteveglio Transition Town’ local initiative.

Table 1

Semi-Structured Recorded Interviews With Key Informants.

Participants (#)	Roles	Date
#1	A political leader of Monteveglio, responsible for environmental policies	05-28-2013
#2	A person working in the municipality’s environment and energy sector	05-28-2013
#3	A person responsible for sustainability education (Environmental Education Center, Regional Park of Monteveglio)	05-30-2013
#4	A TT exponent involved with renewable energy and energy efficiency projects	05-29-2013
#5	A TT exponent involved with renewable energy and energy efficiency projects	05-27-2013
#6	A TT exponent, member of ‘Streccapogn’ (transition-inspired agricultural cooperative)	06-02-2013
#7	A TT exponent, member of ‘Streccapogn’ (transition-inspired agricultural cooperative)	06-03-2013
#8	A TT exponent involved with inner transition activities	06-04-2013
#9	A TT exponent, involved in environmental communication and awareness-raising activities	05-26-2013
#10	A social worker and member of ‘Streccapogn’	06-01-2013

Procedure

A background ethnography, collecting information and public documents through online resources, was undertaken to get adequate access to the field one month before the study was conducted. By consulting blogs and websites, we were able to gain information on activities carried out by local activists in and around the Monteveglio territory, and to learn more about the history of the local initiative, municipality policy-making and environmental commitment (e.g., through municipality resolutions and local press).

Through background ethnography, we identified informants and mediators who facilitated our access to the community. Then we contacted one of the main figures in the Italian Transition Hub and Monteveglio TT who introduced us to other members of the community. Once the research team was at the study site, members of the local groups proved extremely affable and invited us to almost 15 events including meetings, conferences, and other activities. On those occasions, we met several community members engaged in sustainability activities and activists of other Transition initiatives.

During these activities, we wrote notes describing activities, interactions, and roles played by the participants. In addition, interpretations and positions of the researchers were transcribed, taking into account the principle of reflexivity (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). This process allowed us to understand the production of meanings through a process of negotiation and member validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The key informants were all recruited directly at the research site. We identified some interviewees through background ethnography, while others through the snowball approach. In all these cases we opted for a sampling procedure based on a reasoned choice. The interviews began with a presentation and a general introduction to the motivation for choosing the interviewee, and an informed consent process including the signing of an informed consent form by the participants.

The opinions of the key informants, chosen in view of their leadership roles, within local institutions and the Transition initiative, were considered a privileged point of view. After the data collection, the full texts of the interviews and notes were manually transcribed and subjected to qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive analysis was conducted and, after the total corpus was read, a conceptual grid was constructed. Using this procedure, we were able to identify, analyse, and examine relationships among categories and the patterns found in the data.

Theoretical Framework for Data Analysis

In order to explore the socio-psychological processes underlying the participation in the TT initiative and the relationships between local actors, the psychosocial model of community participation proposed by Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) was a particularly important source guiding our study. These authors advanced a comprehensive and articulate conceptual framework for the investigation and understanding of participatory phenomena, distinguishing three fundamental socio-psychological dimensions: shared social representations, shared social identities, and shared conditions and constraints of access to power. These three dimensions are conceived in our study as sensitizing concepts, representing a key reading of participatory processes in the psychosocial literature. We explain the three elements further below:

Shared Social Representations

According to [Campbell and Jovchelovitch \(2000\)](#), a group or a community is conceivable only if the individuals belonging to it share a set of social representations, which contribute to shared worldviews, values, interpretations of reality, and everyday practices. In fact, social representations have a fundamental role in regulating the relationships that groups and communities have among themselves and with others ([Moscovici, 2000](#)), in creating cohesion ([Breakwell, 1993](#)), forming social identity ([Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983](#)), and contributing to its evolution and preservation ([Breakwell, 2001](#)). According to [Campbell and Jovchelovitch \(2000\)](#), community participation provides the arena for the dialogue/confrontation between different/competing representations. Thus, the investigation of participatory phenomena provides an opportunity to investigate how different groups within community can express, negotiate, and modify their shared worldviews about the same object.

Shared Social Identities

Participating as a member of a group or a community depends on and helps to construct shared social identities. Research in this field refers to Social Identity Theory ([Tajfel, 1981](#)) and its subsequent developments. [Klandermans \(2002\)](#) has introduced the concept of collective identity to describe the process of identification with a social group, distinguishing different attributes (salience, political relevance, and strength) and components (affective and behavioural). The role of collective identity has been recognized within social psychology as a fundamental factor in predicting and explaining participatory behaviours ([Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996](#)). People affiliate themselves with particular social movements, or take part in collective action, when a problematic situation generates a collective identity and a shared belief that the group can change the situation through collective mobilisation ([Klandermans, 1997](#)). Furthermore, in the psychosocial literature on participatory processes in environmental protection the role of place identity is widely recognized ([Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983](#)). Empirical evidence has shown that affective bonds, and identification with places, can motivate people to participate in order to seek, stay in, protect, and improve places that are important to them ([Devine-Wright, 2009](#); [Manzo & Perkins, 2006](#)).

Shared Conditions and Constraints of Access to Power

[Campbell and Jovchelovitch \(2000\)](#) have conceived this dimension in terms of material resources and symbolic recognition (or legitimation), and it may be linked to aspects such as empowerment, capacity and the sense of personal and collective efficacy. The question of power refers not only to the conditions of unequal access to (or lack of) resources, but also to the possibility for individuals and groups of get opportunities for participation and influence, and to develop feelings of individual and collective effectiveness ([Cicognani & Zani, 2014](#)).

According to [Campbell and Jovchelovitch \(2000\)](#), it “is through participating that a group can develop awareness about its own resources and can engage with significant others in the public arena” (p. 264). The role of the perceived effectiveness of participation – together with collective identity – has been confirmed in the literature as one of the most powerful factors in explaining the involvement in collective action ([van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008](#)). Forms of citizen participation taking place within a community context – conceived as an ecological setting or system ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)) – are determined and shaped by issues and needs that emerge within a community, including its culture, norms, values and institutions ([Cicognani & Zani, 2014](#)). Therefore, the question of power requires the adoption of an ‘ecological perspective’ in the investigation of participatory processes ([Perkins, Brown, & Taylor, 1996](#)). Thus, the attention focuses on the conditions in which active citizenship is enacted, in particular the objective conditions for the exercise of power, instance, the role that socio-political structures play in providing space for participation and influence, allowing community development and empowerment.

Results and Discussion

Social Representations of Sustainability Transition: Community Action Between Change and Resistance

According to [Campbell and Jovchelovitch \(2000\)](#), the process of participation forms the on-going arena that allows social representations to be expressed, reaffirmed, and if necessary, renegotiated. The social representations approach has proven to be a fruitful framework in investigating the social construction of environmental issues, offering a better understanding of the socio-psychological dimensions involved in environmental protection and sustainability ([Castro, 2006, 2015](#)). In particular, with regard to citizen participation, the approach has shown its usefulness in analysing and understanding environmental protection actions and environmental conflicts (e.g., [Batel & Castro, 2009](#); [Batel & Devine-Wright, 2015](#); [Castro & Batel, 2008](#); [Devine-Wright, 2009](#); [Mazzoni & Cicognani, 2013](#)).

The theory provides a framework for exploring and understanding how different and opposing knowledges – such as those associated with the climate change debate – diffuse in society and can become linked with intergroup power struggles ([Jaspal, Nerlich, & Cinnirella, 2014](#)). Recent studies have paid careful attention to how different groups differ in sense making, and how these differences may be related to local conflicts and negotiated in everyday communication ([Castro, 2015](#)). In fact, according to [Jovchelovitch \(2007\)](#), it is in the dialogue and confrontation of different representations within a community that we need to consider the power differential, since not all representations have equal recognition in the public sphere. Drawing on these premises, informed by the social representations approach, in this study we focused our attention on:

- I. How different meanings about the same object coexist, are negotiated and used within the community and by the same individuals, integrating the analysis of communication, representation and identity processes, while also taking into account the role of institutional and contextual dimensions ([Batel & Devine-Wright, 2015](#); [Castro, 2015](#)).
- II. How representations of power relations among social actors – together with their expectations and relationship over time – shape interaction and communication between groups, and what role these dimensions assume in change and resistance to change ([Batel & Castro, 2009](#); [Jovchelovitch, 2007](#); [Walker et al., 2011](#)).

One of the key concepts of the social representations approach is the assumption that social change does not imply the replacement of old ideas by new ones. Rather, the push for change produces inner conflicts, contradiction, and ambivalence, which may work as forms of resistance to change for groups and individuals ([Jovchelovitch, 1997](#)). Therefore, we explore how the different actors engaged in sustainability expressed through discourse the representations of sustainability and transition, and how they articulated global and local issues.

With regard to sustainability representations, several TTM respondents showed an aversion towards the term, especially with regard to sustainable development, which has been associated with a wide range of deceptive practices (e.g., green-washing). According to TTM participants, the term 'sustainable development' attempts to reconcile economic growth with environmental safeguards using measures to adapt to the current situation that reflect a static, short-term vision of the sustainability path. Even institutional respondents seem to agree with this representation, recognizing that the national energy policy, still based on fossil fuels, is short-sighted and guided by economic interests.

In agreement with recent research on social representations of energy sustainability in Italy (Brondi, Armenti, Cottone, Mazzara, & Sarrica, 2014; Sarrica, Brondi, & Cottone, 2014), the political respondents recognized that energy is mainly represented in the public sphere, within political and media debates, as a matter of economic and national interest, namely a commodity and a strategic material, rather than an ecological resource. However, political interviewees presented the sustainability transition as using the available technologies more efficiently, minimizing the consumption of energy and fossil resources (Extract 1).

Extract 1

Participant #1: Sustainability is essentially the ability to use resources that can be renewed and to avoid using resources that we know can't be renewed over a short period of time [...] and it is also making better use of technology that allows you to minimize energy consumption.

This representation drew the emergence of criticism and polemical representations by some TT adherents who argued that: *"the recourse to technology is not enough, and citizens should be sensitized on the need for lifestyle and behavioural change, because an increase in the production of renewable energy and efficiency is also associated with an increase in energy consumption"* (Participant #6 quoting the Jevons paradox^v).

TT adherents expressed an anti-growth ideology, identifying economic growth as the *"dominant cultural cause of the global crisis"* and recognizing an incompatibility between economic growth and sustainability. In accordance with the movement ideology and goals, rather than sustainability, TT exponents preferred to speak about resilience, described as a *"dynamic sustainability path"* and *"the process through which local communities can survive and thrive facing the environmental and economic crisis"*.

The term resilience originates in ecological sciences referring to the capacity of an eco-system to absorb disturbance, reorganize its function and continue to work (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004). Over the last 20 years, resilience has become a driving force in the sustainable communities' agenda, emerging to become the *"new sustainability"* (Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012, p. 527).

Transferred to the community, the term embodies the numerous ways in which communities adapt to changing social, economic and environmental contexts, and the establishment of local-based responses to externalized pressures (Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012). It involves measures of mitigation (prevention) and adaptation (reaction), attempting to build up strength within communities to deal with external shocks (Dale & Newman, 2006).

In the case of TTM, community resilience refers to the promotion of the necessary capacities, skills and resources in a local community to prevent, adapt, and react to the future scenarios of peak oil and climate change such as resource scarcity, high prices of energy and reduced mobility of commodities (Hopkins, 2008). The development of resilient communities combines the imaginative construction of alternatives for low-carbon communities with a pragmatic approach aimed to cut community reliance on fossil fuels, global trade, and economic dependency (Mason & Whitehead, 2012).

With regard to the representations of transition, the term has recently begun to crop up even in political discourse, as can be seen in the United Kingdom with the publication of the Low Carbon Transition Plan (HM Government, 2009). The notion is increasingly being used as a framework and glue for discourses dealing with the development of community responses to environmental issues and life-course decisions (Brown, Kraftl, Pickerill, & Upton, 2012).

In comparative terms, we can argue that while political actors represent transition as a societal/political goal, namely transitioning to low-carbon and more environmentally friendly systems, TT adherents, instead, re-present it in a more complex way: as an ongoing systemic process aiming to create a viable pathway for sustainability, involving different levels of agency and change (individual, interpersonal, and community). Transition is defined as a process that starts like a virus, in individuals with a systemic awareness, and operating as a seed for the community. This 'inner transition' is described as a renewal of the self, embedding the idea of living in a different way in a post-transition world (Barr & Devine-Wright, 2012).

Personal experiences of inner transition are characterized by stories about moments of crisis and rupture with the past in view of an acquired awareness of collective problems, personal and social needs. New attitudes towards life and nature, a sense of feeling part of a larger entity, and the desire for sustainable lifestyles are all aspects frequently cited by the interviewees in describing changes in their individual life-course (Extract 2).

Extract 2

Participant #4: I felt as if I had to do something, but I did not know what. Then I was introduced to the Transition Movement, and it changed everything in my life. I began to transform everything according to a whole new perspective. I reorganized the way I live, I dismantled my company, I changed my job, I became a transition importer, and now I work here with the people.

Affiliation with the TTM may be seen as an expression of a new way of seeing and giving meaning, which is often accompanied by major individual life changes, such as changing a job, place of living, or taking on a new or different commitment in the community. At an interpersonal level, transition is described as an aggregation of transitioning individuals, which begins in a neighbourhood, and then proceeds to wider groups in the community with people working with a shared vision.

Regarding the community level, the transition is represented through a shared set of beliefs, stressing the necessity for local action in a global perspective, fostering community resilience and harnessing economic re-localization. As Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, and Pfefferbaum (2008) have argued, in a psychosocial perspective the transposition of resilience to the community implies a path of adaptation to external shock, which includes as central issue the empowerment process of the community, through citizens' participation in action, decision-making, and solution-finding.

These aspects are central to the Transition Movement, which is particularly attuned to community involvement activities, as well as to the relevance of group dynamics and communication, recommending the use of Open Space Technology and World Café so that TT groups and the community can debate important issues (Hopkins, 2008). The Transition Movement reflects its own prefigurative orientation addressing questions of power in terms of participation and decision-making at the local level, "tending toward an emphasis on autonomy, inclusivity, networking, non-hierarchy and openness" (Hardt, 2013, p. 3).

Activists tended to focus on group dynamics and communication, experimenting with deliberative democratic methods within their participatory behaviours, such as teamwork, decision-making and cooperation with different groups. Furthermore, they also attempted to encourage local politics to involve citizens, providing inclusivity and legitimation in local policy-making, through approaches such as Open Space Technology, World Café and other direct democracy mechanisms for public deliberation, as was testified by an institutional respondent in Extract 3.

Extract 3

Participant #1: [...] I remember that we have copied the participation techniques that they [Transition Movement] use within their sessions and they help us to build the political program with the World Café [...] then we experienced in these years also the Open Space Technology and the civic revision.

Throughout our ethnography, we had the opportunity to take part in experimentation and discussions of direct democracy mechanisms and participatory democracy.

During an open assembly, the transition-inspired agricultural cooperative Streccapogn attempted to involve private citizens and businesses located in the valley in a participatory SWOT analysis,^{vi} aiming to design a community-supported agricultural project and a business plan.

During a Transition Training (a codified learning experience for setting up a Transition initiative), methods of participatory decision-making were explained and experimented, and group issues were discussed. The management of diversity, referring to diversity as ‘collective genius’, and shared leadership in Transition initiatives were stressed (it should be noted that specific Transition Trainings have been organized for mayors).

During some meetings of citizens, aimed at drafting a statute proposal for the union of municipalities, some movement adherents have included explicit references and guidelines for community involvement in environmental management and urban planning. They stressed in particular the need for community involvement in the public deliberation in case of decisions about land use and projects of high environmental impact - for example, waste incinerators.

The approach of the movement – and more generally of the new environmentalism – marked by openness, inclusion and cooperation of local actors in responding to environmental problems, appears to be a shared frame and valued by all participants.

However, the movement's open and inclusive approach also led to discord among members. Transition was defined as inclusive, “*not saying no to anyone*,”. Yet its success was recognized as dependent on the involvement of social, economic, and political entities of the territory in community action for sustainability, because “*if this doesn't happen the process stops*” and fails. Nevertheless, those same members presented transition as a “*process that starts from the citizens*” and that “*local governments cannot declare themselves ‘in transition’ and carry out the transition; it is not their role, they can only facilitate those processes that the citizens have set in motion*”. Nevertheless, those same members presented transition as a “*process that starts from the citizens*” and that “*local governments cannot declare themselves ‘in transition’ and carry out the transition; it is not their role, they can only facilitate those processes that the citizens have set in motion*”.

The role of local governments in the transition process was a heatedly debated group issue according to some members. Most explained that the decision by the steering group to seek the support of the municipality “*was a controversial one and not everyone agreed with it*”. This statement highlighted members' contentious relationship with institutional politics and the distrust expressed in the ‘them and us’ logic that the TTM is attempting to avoid, as shown in Extract 4.

Extract 4

Participant #5: In my opinion, transition is a process that comes from below. We are the ones who must lead the change. The change will never come from the top [from political institutions]. Contrary to what

some in our steering group think, in my opinion the administration should never have been a part of the transition process because it is an arm of the political power with pre-established, very restrictive rules.

Local governments were identified as part of hierarchical political structures, subject to top-down pressures from political parties, regional and national government to which they must respond, and that limit their action and efficacy.

In addition, some interviewees reported feelings of distrust and frustration about the instrumental use of the transition initiative “*typical of politicians, who put a cap on processes that come from below, and then use them for propaganda*”.

As argued also by Felicetti (2013), the participants’ frustration and skepticism toward politics shaped the nature of their relationship and collaboration with the local council. Today, in fact, only one member of the steering group is committed in a collaborative relationship with local governments addressing energy issues. Meanwhile, many other members are linked to political opposition within civic lists^{vii} or belong to transition-inspired community organizations, which maintain minimal relationships with the council.

Collective Identity, Hope and Efficacy in Transition

Psychosocial empirical evidence has shown that collective identification, or in other words adopting an ‘activist’ identity, constitutes a key factor for involvement in collective action and social movements (Simon et al., 1998). There seems to be an undeniable strength in the TTM’s ability to connect and gather a wide range of ‘alternative’ identities and individuals from different cultural backgrounds under its umbrella: environmentalists, agriculture enthusiasts, politicians, business owners, craftsmen and more (Connors & McDonald, 2011).

In order to investigate collective identification processes and identity positioning we used a discursive approach. All the TT interviewees described themselves not as activists, but rather as “*members*” of the Transition Movement and process (the term transition is often used interchangeably to indicate both the movement and the process), defining themselves, arguing “*we are in transition*” or “*we are transitioning*”, showing a high salience of transition process for their own identity. Collective identification was accompanied by both affective and behavioural components, such as a positive view of, and behavioural commitment to, the transition process and group, and above all, a political relevance and strength of group identification (Extracts 5 and 6).

Extract 5

Participant #6: I am a member, a founding member of the Montevoglio TT. When I got to know the TTM, I found a group of people with a great affinity for ideals and goals, and that reinforced my own commitment [...] I have begun to think about how this movement can avoid becoming a niche experience; perhaps it will be because of the wide variety of people who seem to be able to identify with it.

Extract 6

Participant #9: transition has become my life, it has reshaped my life and that of the community in which I live; we are hoping that consensus and awareness about these things will begin to increase, but this, at least in part, will depend on those of us who do the transition.

In Extract 5, the interviewee emphasized the positive value and relevance perceived in TTM and its approach (which were often compared to other environmental movements), strong identification with the movement and engagement within it.

TTM collective identification was often accompanied by hopeful feelings, which seem to be elicited by its attractiveness, consensus, and influence that the approach may achieve in the wider public, and the ability to go beyond the niche of 'conventional environmentalism'. People joined the Transition Movement motivated by hope that public engagement would increase within civil society, an outcome recognized as dependent on the proselytising, advocacy and awareness-raising activities of those who have already embraced the transition process (Extract 6).

References to personal and collective efficacy beliefs, that emerged from our interviews, were strictly related to community involvement in sustainable activities, and engagement with socio-political and economic frameworks – through cooperation with local governments and business owners – which may increase their contribution and promote their perception of influence (Extracts 7 and 8).

Extract 7

Participant #4: If I can get six municipalities to join the “Covenant of Mayors”^{viii} and support them along the way, it has an infinitely superior effect with respect to installing solar thermal plants at home; you know, the impact on the transition process is much more important because it can affect thousands of people.

Extract 8

Participant #7: Now thanks to Streccapogn’s [the transition-inspired agricultural cooperative] efforts, we are creating several supply chains, one after the other, and some productive realities of the valley are moving forward. They have shown interest in collaborating with us, and they also want to set up a local marketing. Our path is precisely that: to re-localise agricultural production to make my community more resilient because it produces its own food.

Several times, activists identified discursively with transition-inspired community groups and organizations (Extract 8). In many other cases, TT activists’ identity seemed transformed in a personal life project, characterized by a commitment to proselytising (Extract 6), advocacy, and/or cooperation with institutions in the attempt to exert political influence (Extract 7).

Several authors (Klandermans, 2002; Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Simon & Klandermans, 2001) have described this kind of identity development as the politicization of social identity, a consequence of identifying with a social movement – meaning that the identification with a specific group acquires political relevance – allowing the political to become a personal identity project through a process of depersonalization.

With regard to collective efficacy beliefs, specific references emerged connected to the individual’s or the group’s efforts seen within and as a part of a community-based collective action network. The feeling of being part of a “glocal” (local and global) network is one of the most striking motivational aspects found in the interviewees’ statements, closely linked to the shared belief that the group can change the situation through unified efforts (Klandermans, 2002). All the interviewees pointed out that community action must be seen as part of a grassroots initiatives’ network for sustainability, as a necessity and a strong point for global transformation.

Extract 9

Participant #1: one of the basic concepts underlying transition towns is the ability to network and to influence neighbouring communities. Creating a small, sustainable municipality obviously does not amount to much, but increasing awareness and working through a network, we can change something.

Extract 10

Participant #8: When I first met transition, I had the impression that it could really change things. Seeing a network of relationships and collaboration between communities, that have similar experiences although in different ways, makes you feel less discouraged. So many people say, in fact: “Yes, but what can I do myself?”

Activists, as well as representatives of institutions, were convinced that in order to deal with environmental issues effectively and also develop a sense of control, a joint, integrated effort towards a common vision is fundamental. TT members derived their perceived effectiveness from being part of a broader collective action network working locally for global change, setting up community organizations inspired by social experimentation, cooperation and mutual learning (Extract 10).

As outlined by a political respondent (Extract 9), successful transitioning towards sustainability was closely linked to the networking abilities of transition towns, and the influence that successful examples of community action have on neighbouring communities. Furthermore, during his interview, the respondent underlined the active role of local government in disseminating the transition process, through the continuous references to the local municipalities' efforts in the ENESCOM project and the Covenant of Mayors.

Celebrating and Fostering Local-Based Futures and Identities

From the analysis of the argumentations about community action for sustainability, we argue that the development of community resilience is linked not only to responses to environmental and economic threats, but also to the idea of building/reinforcing community cohesion and social capital in the prospect of a local-based future, a representation shared by all participants adhering to the Transition Movement.

The desire to “*reaffirm community relationships*”, and to reacquire a sense of community are, in fact, often recognized both by TT advocates and other members of the community. In light of their shared perception of a common destiny, the respondents all showed the same desire to be useful community members, contributing to improving economic conditions and environmental protection, showing also a high salience of community and place belonging in defining their own identity (Extract 11).

Extract 11

Participant #7: Resilient communities are definitely the future. I do not see any other possibility for evolution and progress of society. We have to move away from the idea of the individual and start saying “we’re a community” and if we want to help this community to move forward, we have to start today to give it direction.

While never losing sight of the extent of the global challenge and concern for the future, the interviewees showed a deep sense of personal involvement and strong community identification. According to the literature (Loomis, Dockett, & Brodsky, 2004; Sonn & Fisher, 1998), this acquired salience of community and place in the emergence of identity is dependent on the perception of external threats for the community.

The territorial dimension can work as an activator for the emergence of collective identities, and the condition that makes it possible is that place becomes subjectively salient. We should consider that the Transition Movement, and the New Environmentalism in general, emphasize the problems derived from environmental and economic crisis at the local level, highlighting the proximity, in time and space, of such threats. Moreover, such environmental

movements identify the local action as a key driver for bringing social change, and local community as the best context to feel empowered to act (Connors & McDonald, 2011).

Considering place a social category that provides content to identity structures has interesting implications in socio-psychological research on participatory behaviours in environmental protection. Indeed, some authors (Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002) have found 'conscious identification with community' – the degree to which individuals identify with their community – as the most significant predictor of Sense of Community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of Community concerns the individual experience of community life (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009) and is conceived as the presence of four dimensions: the perceptions of a sense of belonging to the community, the existence of significant affective bonds, the opportunity to have influence, and the opportunity to meet their own needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Community psychology has paid particular attention to the concept of sense of community, which is considered a catalyst for social involvement in community organization and community participation (e.g., Brodsky, O'Campo, & Aronson, 1999; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). In this regard, we have to acknowledge that all the TT adherents showed a firm desire to maintain and reinforce positive community ties, and to “*restore neighbourhood relationships*”.

This aspiration embodies a “*strategic challenge for the future*”. A more local-based future was defined not as a choice, but rather a necessary step towards a low-carbon life and future scenarios – resource scarcity, high prices of energy and reduced mobility of commodities – and requiring a re-organization of the community in terms of production and supply of primary goods. Transition, it is hoped, will become synonymous with people living together with a shared sense of destiny and responsibility towards the place where they live and the other members of the community (Extract 12).

Extract 12

Participant #6: We need to restore neighbourhood relations and to feel responsible for the place where we live and the other people who live in the community. I mean sustainability always refers to relationships; I think that a sustainable community is one in which people can express their potential and access to the primary goods they need.

This viewpoint appears to be associated with a strong psychological sense of community and highlights how the personal meaning of sustainability is closely linked to social wellbeing, to making the community a source of support and satisfaction: a place where all individuals can feel important and meet their basic social and material needs.

To summarize, the meanings assigned to community and to the bonds linking its members are multifaceted. All these findings are consistent with Campbell and Jovchelovitch's (2000) perspective on community participation, defined as the “process by which a community states and negotiates identities and social representations, which are in turn shaped and constrained by the power relations” (p. 264). Indeed, community is represented as the social and physical place where its members live and belong, the place upon which they depend and for which they are responsible. Community is also actualized as the main collective actor, and scalar response for global change towards a low-carbon future, arguing: “*community will become the protagonist of change, taking care of its members and ensuring access to resources, enacting energy and food resilience*” [Streccapogn Open Assembly, 06/22].

Prefiguration, Strategy and (Dis)Engagement in Transition Processes

We argue that the Transition Movement doubtless reflects its own prefigurative orientation in the imaginative construction of alternative selves and communities, embedding within its group practices, interactions and social relations, the society – or more appropriately the kind of communities – they want to bring about.

The Transition Movement and community ‘activists’ seek to establish more equal, democratic and ecological societies through the five social processes described by [Yates \(2015a\)](#), namely, collective experimentation, production and circulation of alternative political perspectives, establishment of new collective norms and conduct, material consolidation of these perspectives and norms, and, finally, diffusion.

TTM adherents are committed to experimenting with both social and technological innovation in their everyday participatory practices and projects, setting up local-based institutions that provide space to experiment with inner transition, carbon reduction activities, direct democracy, social economy, and local systems of provision. These alternative counter-institutions provide to individuals a laboratory of green alternative practices, and a “school of democracy” and self-governance ([Della Porta, 2009](#), p. 266). Attempting to develop and establish more ecological and communitarian attitudes, norms and behaviours, they embody and disseminate new representations and meanings of community, sustainability, and governance systems. We should note that the prefigurative orientation of the Transition Movement is inherently a strategic and politically oriented one.

The transition process is animated by, and devoted to, a pragmatic and achievement-oriented turn that appears fundamental for the development of feelings of individual and collective effectiveness, but reveals itself also as a source of burnout, disillusion and fragmentation. Establishing a grassroots initiative requires a specific combination of skills, key individuals, resources, and supportive contextual factors ([Seyfang & Smith, 2007](#)). [Feola and Nunes \(2014\)](#), investigating the replication of Transition initiatives in different contexts, have found that supportive contextual factors play the most significant role in determining the perceived success or failure of these grassroots initiatives. Following the suggestion of [Juris \(2008\)](#), we questioned how TT adherents might strike the balance between their radical vision of bottom-up social change and their more instrumental goals, between the TTM principles of ‘working with and not against’, i.e. maintaining positive links with governmental actors, and their everyday experience. As we mentioned earlier, a push for change may produce ambivalence and contradictory thinking which play a significant role in resistance to change ([Jovchelovitch, 2002](#)).

Our findings show that different and even contradictory modes of thought about the Transition Movement’s approach exist side by side within both the groups and individuals. In fact, TT exponents share the representation of transition as an open and inclusive process, entirely different from other environmental movements, and which needs the support and commitment of all the local actors. At the same time, most of the members refuse to collaborate with, purposefully exclude, or maintain only minimal contact with the city council because of unmet expectations and deep-seated political mistrust. The disappointment of participants concerns the perceived lack of serious commitment from the municipality, and wasted efforts in past cooperation and engagement with political institutions.

While some of the members engage with conventional politics as a great opportunity for structural changes, other members instead perceive an attempt by politicians to get publicity, leveraging group efforts and the ‘brand identity’ of transition. Thus, their refusal to interact and engage deeply with conventional politics may be seen as an attempt to defend their collective and socially valued identity, which symbolically represents a radical change and break with the past, and a response to political inaction and stagnation.

Cooperation with the local council is perceived as associating transition with conventional and party politics – with its intrinsic compromises, the results of the hierarchical logic of power – and being co-opted, risking the neglect or betrayal of their more radical and prefigurative orientation. The tension between avoidance and resistance to political co-optation, and adhering to the Transition Movement's stated principles, is palpable. The management of different perspectives and priorities and the different senses of collective purpose within the group seem to have played an important role in the internal schisms and the splits into sub-groups, community organizations and lone wolves, working on different activities and engaging in different ways with local actors.

However, the interviewees clearly sought the support and recognition of local actors, expecting that politicians would engage with climate change seriously and with no compromise, embodying sustainability and taking appropriate and meaningful measures (Extract 13).

Extract 13

Participant #7: I have no interest in politics, because I know that the beautiful words of the formal resolution, in the long run will remain only beautiful words, and above all they are a joke [...] you cannot tell me that you [local government] want to address hydro-geological instability stopping the land consumption if in the new urban planning there are 5,600 housing units to be built in the valley, because then I cannot believe in you.

In this quote, we can note how local policies of land management are perceived to be contradictory to the promises made in the past, and counter to the principles of the Transition Movement, which the municipality claims to have joined with the formal resolution of 2009. Despite the fact that some activists have declared a disengagement and disinterest in politics, they recognize that their activity has a deeply political significance, as they are experimenting with alternative activities - compared to conventional forms of political action - seeking to ensure their future political relevance (e.g., by contributing to the development of a local and low-carbon economy).

As we pointed out, TT activists are striving to materially consolidate and disseminate the inherently political perspectives and symbols (primarily community resilience and re-localization), adopted and developed by the movement, in the community socio-economic and political frameworks. Through small-scale local activities, they contribute to building a social, low-carbon economy by promoting local food initiatives, renewable energy and energy efficiency projects. They engage in setting up counter-organizations and spaces for experimenting with different systems of supplying and consumption, and of relationships and community living. Finally, insisting on the necessity to involve the community in action and decision-making for sustainability, they urge and encourage governance structures to pursue and embody resilience, subsidiarity, and citizens' inclusiveness within institutional practices to regain trust and credibility.

Conclusion

The Transition Town Movement seems to hold great potential to inspire and engage citizens by promoting community development and providing a prefigurative, hopeful vision of a sustainable future. From a psychosocial point of view, the affiliation with the movement seems linked to a search for meaning in one's world and life, and a longing to express one's views and feelings. Negative feelings, such as indignation and dissatisfaction, with regard to social and ecological sustainability issues, are expressed and transformed into proactive, hopeful attitudes and high commitment to activities prefiguring a local-based, resilient future.

These findings further support and underline the role of moral conviction and ideology – as a search for meaning and expression of personal views – in predicting social movement affiliation and collective identification (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2009; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012). Collective identification with the TTM is thus a crucial psychological dimension. The perceived collective efficacy, which derives from identification with the Transition Movement, can be defined as the advocates' shared belief that although they are working locally, they are a part of a broader collective action global network. Grassroots engagement of local communities working together provides the vision and material starting point for a viable pathway for the changes required to address and meet social, economic, and environmental needs.

Identification with the Transition Movement and process allowed the politicization of the members' social identity, which is transformed into a 'life project of personal identity' (see Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007). Although they do not describe themselves as activists, they are engaged in several efforts and activities embodying the movement ideology, the vision, hope, and aim of transitioning toward resilience as the only possible future.

Identification with the Transition Movement seems strongly connected also to the development of place-based social identities. Identification with the community and place dependence seem to play a significant role in the ongoing commitment of TT adherents to their community. A particular aspect that emerged in the results, and has been relatively neglected in the social psychology of collective action, is the sense of community, which seems to deserve much more attention in investigating those contemporary movements – such as the new environmentalism – that try to promote local-based activism and strengthening the communities in responding to global pressures. As suggested also by Mazzoni and Cicognani (2013), in their study on Italian water movement activists, including the sense of community in investigating collective action implies reconsidering the role of positive emotions over negative ones or more instrumental explanations (such as efficacy), in the ongoing commitment of community activists.

In this exploratory case study, we favoured the limited viewpoint of key informants, chosen in view of their leadership roles and long time commitment in sustainability field. Future investigations, using different research designs and larger samples (including TT 'followers' and members of the wider community), should be able to investigate the impact of TT communication campaigns, and experimentation within local communities, in shaping social representations, promoting public engagement, and also in reinforcing emotional bonds with the place and the community.

While the new environmentalism is attempting to go beyond the niche, attracting the wider public, and engaging in socio-political and economic frameworks, further attention should be given to what sustains and shapes public engagement with climate change and grassroots involvement in sustainability. Understanding the socio-psychological aspects involved is a fundamental task, requiring the analysis of representational change, and related intra-personal, intra-group, and intergroup conflicts.

Moreover, it appears fundamental to emphasize what role the socio-psychological aspects play in interactions, communication, and mutual trust among local actors; and above all in the management of different perspectives and priorities within prefigurative groups. Issues (and representations) of prefiguration and power relations, of legitimacy and mutual expectations, represent key open issues for future research. Examining how these dimensions affect grassroots action and stakeholder cooperation for sustainability represents a great challenge for the development of resilient and low-carbon communities.

Notes

- i) <http://transitionculture.org/2009/12/04/what-it-looks-like-when-a-local-authority-really-gets-transition-the-monteveglio-story/>
- ii) <http://www.comune.monteveglio.bo.it/>, <http://www.unionesamoggia.bo.it/>
- iii) A project of the Intelligent Energy Europe programme involving the municipalities located in the valley (European Network of information centres promoting Energy Sustainability and CO₂ reduction among local COMMunities).
<http://ec.europa.eu/energy/intelligent/projects/en/projects/enescom>
- iv) <https://transitionitalia.wordpress.com/>, <https://montevegliotransizione.wordpress.com/>
- v) The Jevons Paradox, or Jevons Effect, refers to the observation made by the British economist William Stanley Jevons in 1865, which asserted that energy-efficiency improvements increase rather than reduce energy consumption because of its increasing demand.
- vi) A strategic planning tool used to evaluate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of a project or in a business venture.
- vii) Name given to a party list presented at an Italian local election which has no official connection with a national political party and which campaigns on local issues.
- viii) The Covenant of Mayors is the mainstream European movement involving local and regional authorities, voluntarily committing to increasing energy efficiency and use of renewable energy sources on their territories. By their commitment, Covenant signatories aim to meet and exceed the European Union's objective to reduce CO₂ emissions by 20% by 2020 (<http://www.covenantofmayors.eu/>)

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Competing Interests

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