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Transformation of an Integral Research(er) through Synchronicities and Mixed Methods

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Christophe Place, M.Eng., M.Sc., M.A., has 10 years of academic teaching and applied research and 5 publications in academic journals in the field of sustainability, social and currency innovation (Switzerland, United Kingdom, Czechia, Azerbaijan). He also has 7 years of field experience in sustainable development management (France, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Equatorial Guinea). His forthcoming doctoral thesis in economics and anthropology uses Integral and mixed methods research approaches for the impact assessment of a complementary currency issued in the Lake District National Park and World Heritage Site. Based at the University of Cumbria, he is affiliated with the Lancaster University Graduate School as a postgraduate researcher. He is also a visiting scholar at the School of Anthropology of the University of Oxford and at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of East Anglia.

Abstract

This reflection explores how multiple changes in academic career, driven by curiosity and guided by the providence of life, led the researcher to discover not only the challenges of sustainable development and currency innovation, but also Integral and mixed methods research approaches. By applying these approaches to a specific sustainability and currency innovation, both the object and the methods of inquiry have transformed the subjects of inquiry – including the researcher himself. The latter has been particularly transformed by two introspective experiences relating to mind and body – meditation and fasting, respectively.

This informal deliberation about this unique researcher's story aims to: highlight the transformational junctures uncovered by meaningful encounters or synchronicities; reveal the transformative catalyst of Integral and mixed methods research approaches on participants; and reflect on the transforming experiences and personal insights provided by meditation and fasting. Career and life choices; demystification of money and methods of investigation; meditation and fasting are all sources of transformation for an Integral researcher and practitioner – who is ready and open to embrace a meta-approach of integration beyond in-depth specialisation. Taking routes off the beaten track is sometimes necessary but not sufficient to evolve, yet it is still required to carry them out and complete them for the metamorphosis to take place. Most significantly, taking a meta-level on the appreciation of relative detrimental or restorative transformation allows one to finally embrace the absolute non-dual transformation of Integral life, methods, and experiences.

Keywords

Integral research, mixed methods, impact assessment, currency innovation, complementary currency, fasting, meditation, non-duality, synchronicity.

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Introduction: transformative story, methods and experiences of an Integral practitioner

As a practitioner in sustainable development (through the academic disciplines of engineering and management) and as an empirical and theoretical researcher in monetary innovation (through the academic disciplines of economics and anthropology), I finally embraced Integral research that encompasses the three philosophical ideals (i.e. beautiful aesthetic or art; good ethic or religion; true logic or science) as well as the three philosophy of sciences (i.e. natural science of body or sensation; social science of mind or interpretation; spiritual science of essence or contemplation) (Visser, 2003).

First, I will tell the story of my transformational junctions that led me to discover Integral research. Next, I will explain how certain mixed methods of Integral research have changed or impacted a specific monetary community – as much as the currency itself. Finally, I will present how two specific experiential practices directly transformed me. Indeed, such Integral and mixed methods research approaches have been proposed but not yet applied in the fields of economics and anthropology for the impact assessment of monetary innovation (Arnsperger, 2009). This research aims to fill this gap. Through an interdisciplinary exploration of my overall path as an Integral researcher and practitioner (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010a), I will argue my interpretation of the concept of detrimental or restorative transformation through the prisms of Integral life, methods, and experiences – as a philosophical, theoretical, and methodological discussion about the concept of transformation as it manifests in empirical, quantitative, and qualitative research practice.

1. Transformational junctures through synchronicities in the researcher's autobiographical journey

Like five members of my family – fervent advocates of expatriation to discover the Old and New Worlds – I became a general and polytechnic engineer (i.e. M.Ing. Magister ars Ingeniaria) while being specialised in environment and energy as I was interested in these issues of our century. Though a dual degree in sustainability management (i.e. M.Sc. Magister Scientiae, M.A. Magister Artium), I then discovered that sustainable development was not limited to water, waste, and energy management; but encompassed environmental, social, and economic issues – as well as culture and governance. However, I also uncovered that trying to achieve Sustainable Development Goals without challenging the paradigm of unlimited economic growth was an illusion (e.g. accumulation of fictitious capital, growth imperative of interest-bearing debt, technological and psychological planned obsolescence, resource decoupling and the rebound effect, weak versus strong sustainability, planetary boundaries versus ecological footprint, post-scarcity economy versus steady-state economy or degrowth

movement) (Jackson, 2009). Therefore, I delved deeper into the question of Money (as a concept with a capital M; cf. Bindewald, 2018), and the providence of life (i.e. synchronicities; see explanation below) brought me to meet the movement/field of complementary and community currency systems during the Great Recession.

By debunking the Money myth, by rethinking the status quo of monetary creation, and by reconsidering the mainstream theories of monetary economics, this movement of grassroots and currency innovations aim to transition to low-carbon societies through the self-determined creation of more sustainable communities (e.g. Money as a common good, monetary plurality and resiliency, solidarity neighbourhood, localism beyond regionalism or municipalism, rewarding eco-friendly behaviours, demurrage to encourage non-accumulation but redistribution of wealth) (Lietaer et al., 2012). As a result, by opening the Pandora's box of the dogma of Money, I not only discovered its incredible power of alienation and emancipation, but also reconsidered all my daily activities of valuing, exchanging, producing, and consuming wealth in a more ethical and responsible way. Hence, I began a long and profound journey of personal development and search for well-being as an ecological then spiritual "Cultural Creative" of "Integral Culture" (Ray & Anderson, 2000). Indeed, providential encounters – or synchronicities – on monetary issues led me to explore the notions of deep ecology, consciousness, and spirituality, until I came across Ken Wilber's Integral theory – also known as the "Einstein of Consciousness" (Visser, 2003, p. 25).

Beginning my research career as an engineer and manager in sustainable development, then driven by my insatiable curiosity (i.e. trying to understand the whys and wherefores of things from my precocious childhood) and guided by some meaningful encounters (i.e. synchronicities that magically answered these existential questions while carving a path to my most cherished dreams), I finally turned to economics and anthropology as a transdisciplinary prism for the study of Money – being myself the distant offspring of blacksmiths and goldsmiths. These transformational junctions not only changed my academic orientation, but also affected my deep beliefs and everyday behaviours (e.g. from atheism to theism, sustainable consumption or diet and transport, meaningful and impactful vocation, daily ritual for body and mind, etc.). This cosmopolitan personal enrichment – living/studying/working in France, Netherlands, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Equatorial Guinea, Switzerland, Czechia, Azerbaijan, and the United Kingdom – and this interdisciplinary background ranging from the formal and natural sciences to the social and paranormal sciences have provided the ideal groundwork for becoming an Integral practitioner (Bhaskar et al., 2016).

All of us standing on the shoulder of giants, the path of the researcher resembles that of the detective seeking solid evidence; the lawyer building a good legal case; the adventurous hero's journey receiving the revelation in the abyss; the alchemist striving to cross the magnum opus towards the philosophical quintessence; the artist, the priest, and the scientist pursuing their respective quests for beauty, goodness, and truth. Indeed, all our contributions to knowledge – critically arguing new insights, perspectives or viewpoints through artistic, spiritual or scientific discoveries and/or paradigm shifts – are supported by existing theories and/or methodologies of reference that are critically acclaimed and praised by peers – as long as we recognise the distortion of reality by the lens of our worldview through reflexivity and

the limitation or bias of our research path through reflectivity (Bhaskar et al., 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Throughout my entire academic and professional career, what some might have seen as single-option life choices were in fact much more like synchronicities (i.e. luck factor, twist of fate, serendipity, meaningful coincidence) in the sense that these circumstances or encounters were significantly related, but without a conventional causal connection – as a consequence of the future rather than the past (Jung, 1960). Finally, in a predominantly modern society that favours in-depth expertise and specialisation of discipline-based categorisation over the meta-level complexity and pluralism of transdisciplinary-driven integration of a post-postmodern minority (Bhaskar et al., 2016), such frequency and breadth of disciplinary change and exploration is too often perceived as a lack of stability or normality rather than an asset of multiple skills and intelligences – and therefore a detrimental transformation for the development of society (collective viewpoint) but a restorative transformation for my personal development (individual viewpoint).

2. Integral and mixed methods research approaches as a transformative catalyst

Integral research approach is based on Ken Wilber's Integral theory and has been enhanced by Edgar Morin's Complex thought and Roy Bhaskar's Critical realism to be merged into Sean Esbjörn-Hargens's Complex Integral Realism research approach (Bhaskar et al., 2016). It has its own integrated mixed methods research approach to validate knowledge, which uses up to eight methodological families – and called Integral Methodological Pluralism (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010a). Because Money is interdisciplinary by nature (Bindewald, 2018) – as a system of rules and values influencing our behaviours and beliefs – the impact assessment and improvement of a currency needs to be holistic (beyond macro/microeconomics alone), by using an integrative methodological framework (Place et al. 2021). In the specific case of the impact assessment of a complementary currency issued from May 2018 to January 2020 in the Lake District – a world premiere in a National Park and World Heritage Site – I conducted six mixed methods as chronologically interconnected research studies, defined as follows with their respective findings. Birthplace of Romanticism with the Lake Poets, the Lake District is the most visited and richest National Park in one of the poorest counties in the country – creating a tension between agricultural or tourism development and culture or nature conversation – which the Lake District Pound (LD£) aimed to resolve in part by targeting visitors with local leading figures, supporting local independent businesses, and giving its profits to local charities (Place et al. 2021).

- Hermeneutics: participatory action research (19 stakeholders' mapping to analyse its business model).

By considering 10 stakeholders (i.e. Independent Money Alliance, Lake District National Park Authority, Lake District Foundation, Cumbria Community Foundation, University of Cumbria, project leader, impact investors, bureaux de change, stores, residents/visitors) the revenue model was based on a numismatic currency to be kept/collected rather than an economic currency to be spent/saved.

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- Systems theory: econometrics accounting (7 months' ledger to estimate its circulation and leakage).

This pioneering revenue model has been validated (2/3 kept, 1/3 spent) after a year of operation, but only represented less than a 10th of their projected target – not enough to generate any profit for two charities (environmental conservation, community support).

- Structuralism: autoethnography (8 relatives' experiential feedback to study its value proposition).

Its value proposition was in line with related experiences: having a fun and unique experience on holiday – although having received too little change back in the complementary currency from participating stores.

- Empiricism: case study (269 participants' surveys to assess their behaviours and collaborations).

The lack of commercial incentive, the inconvenience of exchanging cash in some bureaux de change, and the restrictive annual expiration date caused his premature end – despite the success of the marketing strategy.

- Ethnomethodology: ethnography (49 participants' interviews to investigate their beliefs and values).

Targeting residents as much as visitors, extending the network of participating stores, developing a digital currency, and pedagogically address the money taboo in a bottom-up approach could improve this monetary scheme – which has nonetheless promoted the region.

- Phenomenology: meditation and fasting (7 practitioners' interviews and 1 practitioner's description to evaluate the root of expenditure).

These practices can help balance the cravings and aversions of our minds and bodies – including spending and consumption.

As a result, the interaction with this complementary currency moderately impacted the local spending but reasonably raised awareness of localism and monetary economics among participants (i.e. bureaux de change, stores, residents/visitors). To a certain extent, they defined Money as an evolutive concept and rule which activates values and collaborations, while encouraging behaviours and beliefs (i.e. an Integral object of inquiry). Since ½ of surveyed and ¼ of interviewed participants changed their awareness and perception of the Lake District Pound thanks to the research process itself, these data collections participated in the awareness-raising (Place et al. 2021).

Therefore, not only the various methods of inquiry (i.e. data collections), but also the object of inquiry (i.e. Money/currency) were a transformative catalyst for the subjects of inquiry (i.e. researcher and participants). Directly involved in an applied research project (that aims to co-create a common value among stakeholders through an innovative currency circulating in a unique National Park and World Heritage Site with its ground-breaking collector-based revenue model), these Integral and mixed methods research approaches were at the

crossroads of action, activism, and transformative research – by actively promoting some paradigm shifts in impact assessment, mixed methods, monetary economics, and sustainable development. Finally, by ending after 20 months of operation, this currency project has had a detrimental transformation on the reputation of currency innovation to support the local economy (collective viewpoint), but a restorative transformation as an educational tool for better understanding the nature of Money (individual viewpoint).

3. Personal introspection with meditation and fasting as transforming experiences and practices

After studying the use of a complementary currency in relation to conventional money, and to better address the complexity of the study of Money, I decided to explore the deep roots of consumption or expenditure through some introspective practices – that do not involve the use of money and currency – in order to investigate the internal process that occurs in my mind and body. As far as I am concerned, the practices of meditation and fasting – again discovered through meaningful encounters or synchronicities and allowed by an Integral approach and practice – have been incredible transforming experiences for such investigation and beyond – by respectively equilibrating my mental and emotional state (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006) and improving my alertness and well-being (Fond et al., 2013).

Indeed, I had the opportunity to practice the Vipassana meditation technique – one of the most ancient meditation techniques rediscovered by Siddhartha Gautama – during a 10-day residential retreat. By constantly training my mind to observe the subtle or gross sensations of the body linked to my higher/positive or lower/negative thoughts and emotions, I discovered the law of impermanence as everything rises and passes away until reaching a modified state of consciousness of non-duality and timelessness – consistent with my theistic belief. Therefore, I started to stop reacting as often to my craving or aversion to unnecessary needs, such as overconsumption or overspending (Place et al., 2021).

After improving my capacity for commitment with this meditative experience, I also had the opportunity to follow an introspection through a 40-day Rational fasting according to Arnold Ehret's method and a 30-day Intermittent fasting – which have brought me mental and physical rejuvenation. By ingesting the equivalent of a bowl of fresh fruit juice with mineral water everyday, I have not only cleaned my body and mind toxin, but also improved my mood and productivity – while drastically reducing my consumption budget and habit to about £2 a day. I also discovered that my craving or aversion to food and drink consumption was not due to physical hunger or thirst but to mental desire or emotional compensation with moments of pleasure (i.e. sense of taste and smell, caring for others by cooking, socialising by sharing the meal) (Place et al., 2021).

Both meditation and fasting have influenced not only my monetary expenditures and food/drink consumption, but also my relationship with my mind and body by better managing my natural tendency to craving and aversion as well as my ability to focus with greater lucidity – embracing more frequently the law of impermanence and a timeless state of non-duality which reinforced my deeply held beliefs. Finally, these practices had a detrimental transformation on my contribution to the economy by not using money and not consuming

goods and services (collective viewpoint), but a restorative transformation on my mental and physical balance by reducing my stress and emotional compensation through food/drink (individual viewpoint).

Conclusion: Integral life, methods and experiences transformed the research and the researcher

Thanks to a multisectoral professional career and a multidisciplinary academic path led by synchronicities, the curious exploration of various research domains or cultures and the providential discovery of diverse philosophies of science directed me towards an integrative and holistic research approach (i.e. Integral and mixed methods). The conduction of Integral and mixed methods research approaches transformed the prism of investigation, which in turn impacted the participants of the research project (Place et al. 2021). As Integral research fosters the sciences of the body, mind, and spirit, their use has provoked definite transforming experiences for the researcher. By integrating, combining and mixing various methods, I transformed the research analysis of currency impact; and by using creative research methods (i.e. slam, poem, collage, etc.), I also transformed the dissemination of research findings (Place, 2021).

Significantly, all these aspects of transformation are at the core of Complex Integral Realism, that is of scholarly interest (Bhaskar et al., 2016). Indeed, the imprint of Complex thought is the significance of interdisciplinarity, self-reflection and synchronicity in the epistemology of research (just like my Integral life and autobiographical path of discovery of new fields of research and bibliographical references that have enriched my critical literature review; cf. Section 1). The one of Integral theory is to be found in the importance of developmental evolution and methodological perspectives (just like my Integral and mixed methods research approach with critical reflectivity; cf. Section 2). Critical realism insists on a realist ontology of mind-independent objects that cannot be reduced to the empirical experiences of an observing subject (just like my Integral experiences and practices of mind reaction to body sensation and vice versa through meditation and fasting to address a critical reflexivity; cf. Section 3) (Place, 2021). Provided that the researcher and practitioner are ready and open to an integrative meta-approach that goes beyond a specialised disciplinary-approach, integral and mixed methods research approaches allow a broader investigation of any phenomenon – while respecting the fundamental principles of research, namely critical literature review, reflexivity, and reflection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Notwithstanding giving prominence to methodological span over depth implies a lack of disciplinary mastery (Bhaskar et al., 2016).

My career change and academic retraining in the impact improvement and development of currency innovation for the information revolution – from conventional money as we know it to exchangeable, measurable and expressible currencies (Bindewald, 2018) – not only metamorphosed the various participants interacting with such currency, but also transmuted my Integral evolution as a researcher and practitioner – according to my own Integral Psychograph Assessment of myself evolving on average over the last decades from modern to post-postmodern perspectives (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010b; Place, 2021).

That is my interdisciplinary exploration and interpretation of the concept of detrimental or restorative transformation that resonated with my research path and the sense of life – which are in constant evolution – discovering that what could be perceived as a detrimental transformation from a collective viewpoint, could be appreciated as a restorative transformation from an individual viewpoint (cf. Section 1-2-3). As a result, my main contribution has been to highlight and reconfirm the well-known fact that the appreciation of a transformation is always relative (i.e. positive or negative according to the viewpoint). As a reflection, I therefore argue in favour of an Integral approach and practice towards a meta-level step back or overview (i.e. integrative meta-approach) in order to appreciate the absolute non-dual transformation of each step or commitment in thought, in word, by action and omission (i.e. the transformational junctures, catalyst, and experiences which are respectively synchronicities, Integral research, and introspection).

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