# Using metaphors – a method for encouraging participants to share their experience

## Transcript

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Ceri Davies: My moment is now, sort of just in the last two weeks and looking ahead to the next month or so. And I feel like along the river I sort of feel like I'm approaching some rapids, so I sort of feel like it's been a little bit calm, a little bit sort of, easier going on this project. So I should say it's the peer research project that I talked about earlier, which has been running for a couple of months now. But I feel like I'm approaching the rapids because I sort of feel like we're getting into territory where we've recruited participants and we're about to start them in a programme of training and they're about to go into their communities and the rapids are leading up to a waterfall. So the thing for me is about the conversation we were having earlier about trying to avoid defaulting back to my research practice pre-pandemic just because things are a little bit different now or we're not only having to work exclusively online or there are demands on our research which we were having to kind of navigate simply because of social distancing.

So, yeah, the rapids are kind of going up to the waterfall. I am trying to avoid that sort of in my research practice in terms of how I'm thinking about working with others and also what I might expect from others by not pretending that everything is as it was before. So I'm trying to turn the canoe around, I think, possibly. [Laughter] Because there is also this thing around for me at the moment with this you could get taken by the rapids quite easily towards the waterfall because you think it's easier, because you recognise it. You think, 'Oh, okay, I understand how to do this,' or how to convene people face-to-face in place, or whatever it may be. So I think that's the bit I'm in at the moment. So, yeah, that is my starting point. So I don't know if that prompts anything for anyone else.

Ned Barker: I've been having some similar reflections in terms of what to do now things are looking slightly different. So since March 2020 when the first lockdown in the UK happened to now, I've been engaged in doing sensory ethnography in various ways. So I've been actively researching throughout, and in that little task of doing the river, I don't know if you'll be able to see… So here's March 2020 and where we are now. I guess this kind of dam, in a sense, is not being able to access the field sites and having to adapt the methods in a very concrete and reactive way. So the water is very constricted over the dam and running fast, and that's kind of represent the kind of feeling of doing the research at that time and having to do everything very quick and to progress. And it's splintering, so there's lots of options and you kind of follow a stream, you redirect the research and it's kind of meandering along and you're making progress. And then really now we're in a different moment, March 2022, in which I can do some sensory ethnography, you know, in an actual physical space with some certain populations and types of people.

So I think because it's widened out, like the water is going slow enough that there's a bit of question to reflect on larger kind of questions around the relationship between methods and the social kind of context in which we find ourselves. So I've been kind of reflecting on questions around where we are now, what uncertainty is doing both in society, but to our research methods with a particular kind of thought about where do we go next, which really connects to what you were saying there, Ceri, about, like, do you go to business as usual to the methods that (inaudible 0:04:23) or do you kind of completely go, 'Well, actually aspects of this doing online sensory interviews contributes to be able to do certain things'? Do you do away with the old and out with the new or do you blend them in certain ways? So it's kind of those are the position I find myself in now is thinking about what the current situation affords and where we are and what to do with it in terms of the methods. So, yeah, that's my response.

Ceri Davies: Yeah, and it's made me think, as well, that there's like an ethical dimension to it to me, as well. So this idea of like collapsing back into how it was before means that I might not be practising my research in the most ethical way, because I won't be kind of actively taking account of my participants' positions or their changed realities, as well as my own and all that comes with that. So there's this kind of dual thing going on about applicability of method, but also it goes back to a point we were making earlier about are we taking stock of the now and our positionality in relation to ourselves and the work that we're doing. So there is this slightly more kind of philosophical element to it as well as the kind of practical part of making sure that you're sort of doing the right thing by the research, by the people who are involved in it and also with a healthy dose of uncertainty because I don't know the answer [laughter] just yet.

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Romina Istratii: Happy to add to that next, if I may. I'm still debating if the start of my project, which was November 2020, which was a storm (inaudible 0:06:01) and just nothing, no water, because my project is based in Ethiopia (inaudible 0:06:07) in the UK. So I'm based in Ethiopia and, upon arrival, literally four days later, a war started in the research site. So the project started, the war started and the pandemic was happening already. So I think I had a breakdown, a mental breakdown, to be honest with you. And since then, I think someone raised this before that, you know, uncertainty and hardship forces you to think creatively and productively. And so, you know, we shifted the project to other regions. We adapted as well as we could. We built new partnerships. So I think we were quite fortunate to be able to find those partnerships.

So I think we're now at a point, we entered the second year of the project where we have adapted. We've achieved some of the major milestones that we had for year one and now we're having new opportunities are appearing from these new partnerships that seem to deviate slightly from the original vision, but not really. It falls within the project objective but, you know, in different ways than we had imagined. And so there are new opportunities that seem to kind of deviate a bit from the original plan. And the question now is should we change the plan. should we transfer budget from original activities to new activities and new opportunities. You know, how do we kind of leverage on the new, the positive side of these challenges, right, without rejecting these new directions, right, any new opportunities but, at the same time, honouring the original vision that was created in partnership.

And, you know, we do aim to be decolonial and honour the collaborative nature of the project. So, of course, we don't want to deviate from the original plan that was co-created to some extent with our original partners that we can't access now in the conflict area. So, you know, there is this dilemma, which I think is also an ethical dilemma of, you know, a practical and an ethical dilemma at the same time because one has to make sure that the project continues, it's implemented and be accountable to the funder and also make sure that the funds are being used because if we don't change the plan, then we can't use the funds. And so that is a missed opportunity, as well.

Olimpia Mosteanu: I think I can take it from here. And I have actually the whole river. I'm not really sure, I'm going to try to walk you through it. I really did my best. So what I wanted to show first… I think it's something I don't whether maybe Ned and Pedro were talking about the let's not forget the productive dimension of dealing with uncertainty. So the way I structure my river is like on this axis, the vertical, you have the life of the project, and then on the horizontal one, you have here the moments when dealing with uncertainty was overwhelming. I think it's really important to acknowledge that. But, as we were talking about earlier, I think it's really important to acknowledge the fact that actually at moments during our projects we felt that it was a productive thing, that there were a lot of lessons to be learned.

And I guess I just wanted to kind of highlight two moments that are opposite. One of them was this one where we have the boat - I don't know if you can see the boat - but, basically, I think an event like ours is a boat that we had during, you know, the trajectory of COVID, and I think we had a lot of events, like this one where we could meet and we exchange views and I think we were each other's support at one point or another. I think for me this is late January this year where also the flexibility of methods that we could try was a really good thing. And I think there were just a lot of new ideas about how we can recruit people, how we can engage people, how we can have access to people that maybe before we couldn't, just because, you know, they were all the time busy, but now we had all these online platforms and new ways of getting in touch with people. And then, as I said, like a lot of the events and the people I put in the safety boat that could help us, you know, navigate all these difficult waters.

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But then I want to just to very quickly kind of show the current moment. Also, the current moment for me is actually on the negative side where I feel like there are a lot of things that are making it a little bit unbearable to deal with uncertainty. And I think some of the things already got mentioned is about the difficulty of recruiting people, of retaining people and, as I was talking about earlier, the difficulty of actually ensuring the wellbeing of the research team itself. And I would add something that I think something that Ceri and, I think, Ned inspired me to think about. I feel like, as a researcher, we feel this pressure right now to show that we have learned something, that, you know, all these different both tools that we developed during COVID, but also just the ways in which we, as researchers, behave, that these things have taught us something that's really important and we feel responsible to show that is the case in our current work.

And same with the ethics. I feel like we feel this responsibility to show right now that we have learned something about research ethics and about the rigour. And, you know, as we started in the first workshop, we said, 'Oh, maybe COVID can help us rethink what research ethics and research rigour is about.' And I feel like this moment, maybe for me, maybe for others, is of enhanced kind of difficulty or like dealing with uncertainties of a more intense... It's more intense just because I feel like all these burdens are piling up on each other, including this big one that I feel like, 'Oh, I should be able to rethink research, ethics and research rigour in light of all these many complex experiences.'

Pedro Rothstein: Okay, I'll go next. Talking about uncertainties, uncertainties, pressures, I also did a drawing, quite big - I hope you can see it - but I'll start… Basically, I want to talk about my PhD research because I'm six months in and it's more personal and I guess long-term project that I have at the moment. And also it is perhaps the one that I have more agency in terms of making uncertainty certain. And I feel like this pendulum movement has been one of the things that I've learned and one of the strategies that I'm taking to approach this. But also just to take a step back beforehand, I think that… So this is me six months ago and also now. So I felt like I was, you know, I'm here, I'm starting something, I'm grounded, I've got a plan, I've got funding, I've got time, I've got ambition, but I also have all these streams of decisions and things that I need to refine and reshape as the literature review or the methodology or the research questions or, you know, selecting the case study, going through ethics. And these are things that I'm kind of failing now, but this leads me to this huge sea of uncertainty, and I believe that six months ago this was quite overwhelming.

So I know where I am and I've come a long way to just be here starting this big, long journey, but there is this sea of uncertainty with sea monsters and creatures and storms and challenges that need to be faced and need to be overcome. So my initial reaction was to be quite anxious and I wanted to control and to decide everything then and there. So in order to tackle the uncertainty, so I felt like I needed to just make those decisions very quick, read everything I could as fast as possible so this would mean that I'm moving forward. But then again, the nature of PhD research and long-term research projects is about allowing time to develop, and there's so many things that you don't control or that will change even if you have a plan and if you have strategies in place to navigate those changes. And even when you reach the sea of uncertainty, there is also this deep sea level of the field research. So when you have everything ready, you still have to go and do the delivery of the project. And there are so many things that can go wrong or can go differently from what you previewed or foresaw, and then analysing and writing and finishing and getting to the end, to reporting or, in my case, to submitting my final dissertation thesis.

So that's why I wanted to sort of focus on this at the moment because I think it can be applicable to other research projects. And just one final comment, which is that in order to be in this point here as the boat, there was the whole uncertainty that came beforehand of COVID. And I want to stress this because, for me, when March 2020 and the first lockdowns and the initial changes, drastic changes that came with COVID, for me, it was actually an opportunity to have the time and the space and the focus to really work on this, and before COVID I didn't have that luxury, alright, I wasn't being able to have that time.

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So for me, the uncertainty of COVID, it was stressful and challenging, but it also gave me this gold opportunity to really focus and put together my PhD research project and get funding for it, etc. So when I got here, I had passed those uncertainties, but then I had the whole sea again. So I feel like what I want to say is that there is always this sort of movement of, you know, becoming or making things certain, but then there's other things that will be uncertain. And on a personal or on a professional level, you know, either as a researcher or as a citizen, as a theatre maker, and obviously working with other people. So, yeah, I guess knowing that there will always be this shift perhaps helps us to have less anxiety and to be, I guess, more straightforward when those uncertainties happen again, because they will.

Ceri Davies: I think it's interesting, Pedro, that in your experience, that sort of initial moment of uncertainty or the uncertainty that was introduced through the pandemic created space for you. This is my interpretation, and this might not be quite the right way of putting it, you might not use that language, but it did the opposite for me. So it was the chaos that's been talked about in the chat and this sort of urgency and pressure and confusion and, you know, kind of overlaid with the general, you know, sense of the world that everyone was experiencing at that point. But in my sort of working context and my research context, yeah, it did the opposite and it really sort of focussed down onto a whole set of pressure around having to convert and adapt and navigate with no time to think about it. So I think that's also an interesting reflection with respect to kind of facing uncertainty now and in the future. I didn't give myself and wasn't offered, so it's a two-way thing, a moment to think, 'Ah, so what will I do here then? Like I'm just going to need to take some time out to just like work this out.' And that didn't happen. Instead it was like react, react, react, react, react.

So in some ways, that's why, partly on my river, which I've not drawn out, this feels like the calmer time, this kind of having got over this sort of hump of keeping the show on the road, keeping people employed, keeping my team safe and happy, making sure we could still deliver a research for the people we do research… You know, those types of things. And those things came first in the priority order of working stuff out. But that has also given me some learning, as you were pointing out with your picture, that you know that there's something else to come, but perhaps now you have got some resources and resilience and some sense of how you might approach it. And I also think there are aspects of that where I might try to give myself more permission - me and, you know, sort of organisationally - to just be a bit more intentional about it.

Because I think the nature of uncertainty is this introduction… For me anyway, it's really the first time that I've experienced something on this scale in my research career of an impact of this type. So I think that, again, there's something in there about being confronted by this thing that you haven't really had to be confronted by before and, yeah, would I do things differently next time. I'd like to think I had a bit of space, but just that concept of having some or having none, yeah, just came up for me listening to you talk there.

Romina Istratii: And, Ceri, if I may add to that, I think we were discussing earlier how, you know, dealing with uncertainty kind of brings up new skills in one oneself. I think I said earlier that I feel like an entrepreneur these days trying to navigate new situations every day and, as you say, react, react and troubleshoot but also kind of leverage new opportunities, because I don't know if tomorrow will have new opportunities because tomorrow we might have a new crisis. So I'm trying to kind of, you know, not feel secure, essentially; I'm training myself not to feel secure so that I can be proactive today. And I think that's an interesting kind of outcome. Perhaps we, as researchers, are realising perhaps that the research is, you know, almost like any other task that we're dealing with in our lives; it requires, you know, multiple skills and thinking outside of the box. You know, perhaps we have been a bit too rigid in terms of how we do research and how we think around research.

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Myself, dealing with this very large project in three countries in the last now second year of the project has made me realise that, you know, there are sectors that actually deal very well with uncertainty and risk mitigation and planning when there is, you know, in front of the unknown such as financial prediction or entrepreneurship or business or sectors that, you know, are leaders in whatever they do. So I think perhaps we need to kind of look at other disciplines and sectors and see how they deal with these situations and integrate some of these insights in our own research practice, you know, and just realise that perhaps the answers do not always lie within, you know, our own discipline or our own sector. So this might be that moment that we actually look for new directions and really think outside of the box, I guess. Yeah.

Olimpia Mosteanu: If I may add to that, I thought it was such an interesting point that you highlighted, Romina, and also this concept of the researcher as entrepreneur. I think it's very interesting because, to me, what this makes me think about is, okay, these are all our responsibilities, these are all our individual lessons, but what about the larger institutions and structures. Like are there any kind of changes that are happening within, you know, the academic institutions, you know, the third sector organisations that are doing research? Like what are the lessons that they are, you know, learning? How are they changing? Because what I'm hearing is like we are we, as individual researchers, in our individual organisations, it seems like there's a lot of learning and refashioning of our own selves as researchers, but I think we can't be alone and we shouldn't be left alone. I think that there should be more of a structured institutional kind of learning that goes hand in hand with, you know, the way we are transitioning into these new roles.

And I would add to that, saying that, you know, this idea of now the researcher being an entrepreneur, as well, and all this responsibility that is added on our shoulders makes me just think that, in a way, it's capitalism and all these neoliberal structures are further being imposed on us. It's as if, you know, all this adaptation and adjustment of research practices is like so much about individual researchers, it has to take all this responsibility on, and not so much on the systems that somehow they seem to be just fine being as they were. And all the work, again, remains on individuals who have to become, you know, entrepreneurs in a new kind of world while everything else stays kind of the same, because it's working. Yeah. I don't know if you agree with me on this assessment, but, yeah, it sounds like a lot of the work to come is still on us and not so much somehow streamlined onto other kinds of actors and structures.

Ceri Davies: I had a slightly different thought in relation to what Romina was saying. So I agree with both what Romina said and, Olimpia, what you've picked up on there. As you were talking, Romina, I was thinking a little bit about… So it was when you were talking about the kind of bridging from learning, from, you know, how do we see ourselves in relation to others, and I was wondering whether… So the pandemic itself may be a… I don't know if it's a typical crisis or an atypical crisis in the context of other forms of uncertainty that might be arising globally, but I wonder if as… So the thing I was thinking about is this idea that there's this more common experience happening and the boundaries between researcher and research or us as researchers and our personal lives or, you know, these boundaries I feel were much more blurred or perhaps heightened or amplified as a consequence. It's not the only time it happens, but I feel like perhaps it's an example.

And I wondered about whether there's the possibility in here somewhere that this kind of brings us or has done, brought us epistemologically closer to our participants. Because I'm interested anyway in a kind of knowledge production and forms of knowledge and power in research and the way in which that acts, and we're all involved in projects and processes which engage with that too. And it just made me think, you know, there was this kind of common… So rather than this separation occurring between me, as a researcher, going out to do my research, I may or may not have something in common with the people I'm working with, all of a sudden I did have something in common and I do have something in common in the sort of wider social context. And that's as far as I've got with that, but it just, yeah, that thought got sparked from just listening to a bit of that conversation there, and what are the implications of that, obviously, question mark.

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Ned Barker: I think these discussions are really interesting because it kind of feeds into adding to thoughts I'm having around like where we are at now. And what you picked up there about, in many ways, the onus has been on us, as individual researchers and individual projects, to respond to some sort of external circumstance to continue to produce what we said we were going to produce and we all coming around and there's certain kind of fraught dynamics to that that we've all kind of experienced as researchers. But there's also been a lot of literature published and a lot of experiences we've shared as a group about like how we've experimented or innovated our methods. And there's a lot of learning there to capture through these individual kind of research trajectories that have gone through uncertainty.

But now I guess there's different types of uncertainties that are continuing from COVID, but also from other things, that are really characteristic of a wider kind of world in which we live in and in which research operates and like academics and universities are placed, which does draw in these kind of questions around like how do our disciplines and our structures mould to these new times and what sort of training does that require, and what onus should be put on… I think you said, Ceri, about participants producing knowledge and, closer to our participants in that way through these times, how can we use different epistemologies and different knowledge producers in these new times, I think, is kind of broadening the discussions to these more deep, longer-term things in which we need to kind of call for more structural and systemic and disciplinary changes, not just, okay, my project needs to move from doing an ethnography to doing online interviews kind of adaptations. So yeah.

Olimpia Mosteanu: I would like to add to that. So I thought it was so interesting what you were saying, both. Ceri, your point about being closer to participants, it resonates so much. I don't necessarily agree, though. I think to me sometimes it feels like that, sometimes it doesn't, because I think it depends on the participants. I think we have all been engaged in research projects in which, you know, our entire group of participants, you know, of a specific demographic completely dropped out. Like I was in that situation and it was… Again, like we know, COVID impacted different demographics differently. So I think in some way maybe we are closer to some of the participants, and I do think that we have challenged some of the power relations and we have managed to start thinking about, you know, not extracting knowledge from communities because we are able to do more participatory research because we needed some allies in those communities, because we couldn't be as close geographically as we used to be.

And I think Romina talked about this in our first workshop. You know, the fact that we couldn't go to do fieldwork in some countries meant that we had to rely on people from those countries. Hence we had to rethink, you know, power relations, knowledge relationships. But then I also think that with some participants, actually, we have grown far apart. And I'm thinking especially about people who lost their jobs, people who remained, you know, unemployed through the past couple of years. I think those people, unfortunately, you know, their voices, I think we kind of missed them because, you know, they had much bigger concerns than being our research participants. I wouldn't want to generalise, but in my own work I feel like, yeah, there are some groups of people whose voices we completely missed and we need to think about how we manage to reincorporate their voices moving forward.

Ceri Davies: Yeah, absolutely. And I think maybe just to kind of clarify to the sort of origin of my thought, it was just more around… Yeah, maybe it's that. Maybe you've added some examples to it, in what ways might uncertainty speak to the kind of epistemological distance that might otherwise exist between researchers and the people that they research in normative structures and disciplines, of course. And there's all kinds of ways to kind of subvert or be on the edge of those or not. You know, so is this a moment where, as a result of that innovation and need to create, adapt or evolve, it's also an opportunity to relook at that and understand some of the ways in which it may or may not have facilitated some change around those boundaries or not. And, you know, and/or what are the consequences of where that might be happening, but also where it might not be, so… And that came across strongly there in those last comments around, whilst that may have worked in some cases, it's certainly not the case in others. But, yeah, I think kind of epistemology in the broadest sense in terms of research as a practice rather than individual relationships between researchers and researched, although perhaps it acts in multiple ways.

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Romina Istratii: If I may add to that, Ceri, I think that's a brilliant point and I think what we see here is, if I may say, is, I don't know, a humanisation of research. Again, I think perhaps because of the capitalist system we're in, the different conflicting priorities of researchers, the different people we are accountable to - funders, institutions, communities - we kind of troubleshoot, we became, you know… We just almost work mechanically and, you know, we just have so many responsibilities that I think sometimes it has become about continuing the projects and proving that, you know, we have the capacity to deal with the challenges and bring projects to fruition, which, you know, our career careers depend on, you know, to say it blatantly, right. And I think in doing that, in that process of struggle, we sometimes forget not only the human aspect of research and the human element, not just our participants. I think we are more reflective about our participants' needs oftentimes than our own and think this crisis has evidenced or has reminded us how vulnerable we all are and how important it is that we work first as individuals and then as researchers, right? We have those moments within teams where we can express our frustrations and challenges and be a mechanism and a platform of support for each other.

And I've seen this in my team. You know, I think in the beginning I was quite, I wouldn't say demanding, but I would expect, you know, certain objectives to be met. And I think as time went by and I saw my own difficulties and challenges and the difficulties of partners dealing with not just the pandemic but the war consequences here in Ethiopia, it just became clear that, you know, we need to prioritise human wellbeing and ensuring that we give people the time they need. You know, some things take more time; there's different ways of dealing with situations. And I think that's a good thing. You know, it's hard to be flexible when you need to meet objectives in very tight deadlines, let's be very clear about it, but, at the same time, I think it kind of forced us to try and find a way where we can work under pressure but still honour our, you know, kind of, you know, our needs as human beings first and foremost, our family life. When people are sick, we give them their time.

So I think this humanisation, I don't know how else to put it, but I think it's a wake-up call in a way. I don't know what we do with it moving forward because, as you said, it is a capitalistic system and it's a very demanding system. I think, you know, institutions are becoming even more precarious than they used to be. So, you know, unless we have support from institutions, unless institutions themselves change, you know, academic institutions, and also funders become more flexible, I don't think that we can continue in that direction and, you know, foster these positive lessons and adaptations that we have achieved, you know, for years to come post-pandemic and post-crisis. Yeah, that's a thought. I'd love to know how other people think about all this.

Pedro Rothstein: Yeah, I just want to add to Romina's… I feel and I sort of intuitively see and hear you guys, and that uncertainty, because it's a continuum, but it also has all these dimensions and natures and impacts, it does shake the grounds of many things. And even before the pandemic, for example, there were huge accelerated technological changes, cultural changes already brewing and perhaps this has sort of increased, the inequalities have been increased, as well, as a result of the pandemic worldwide. So this poses sort of like even a political responsibility or a call to action, as you were saying, of the role of research itself and the responsibility that research has in society, as a whole, and, obviously, in each particular project. So it's ethics, it's aesthetic, it's politic. And I do concur to this idea of democratising knowledge and evening the shift, the power dynamics that exist in our project. Even with the best intentions, there's always, you know, hierarchies and power dynamics at play.

So this idea of the human aspect, the environmental aspect that is brought by or heightened by those crises that feel very much urgent and also very high stakes - the climate emergency, wars, pandemics. So there is a sense of responding quickly, so being resilient - and someone was talking about resilience - although resilience can also be co-opted by the neoliberal discourse and, you know, toughen up and just whatever it comes, you just go through and survive and carry on and produce. And this idea of ongoing productivity without actually reflecting why are we doing this, how do we do things, the epistemological debate, as well.

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So what I would like to just add or finish with is this idea that, because of all these rapid changes and the constant need to be adapting and assessing and obviously getting funding for projects and, you know, the structures in place also constrain us in many ways, but building spaces to actually breathe, to actually reflect together this interconnectedness. We talk about networks, we talk about complex systems. We need more of this within the academia, within fields, within different methods, but also beyond the academia with the people we work with, the people we study, the subjects, the organisations, the institutions. There needs to be more spaces where we can actually share knowledge, exchange, co-create together, co-research together and build this different society. And one final element which relates to resilience, but perhaps flips it around a bit, is the idea of flourishing.

So how can we think in a systemic way of actually amplifying potentials in people, in projects and then navigating those uncertainties or using uncertainty as a fuel, you know, to constantly be able to adapt and grow from it? So I would say, yeah, resilience and flourishing, which connects to this idea of systems, you know, either mycelium networks or plants or, you know, the ecosystem idea, everything is connected. And this has been something that we learned perhaps from the pandemic, but also from living in a globalised world. So not just money is connected - people, information, feelings, energies, everything is part of the same system. So I feel like we need to have more and more of this approach of building, holding, treasuring these spaces of share and exchange. Either it's in a research context or just in normal life.

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