Regenerative Practice as Transformative Design Framework

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Regenerative practice is a theory of transformative practice which centers reconnection and being-in-relation as key practices of eco-social change in societies of the global North. It is a practical theory of social change that theorizes the interlinking of the earth’s natural ecosystem, social relations and individual well-being. The objective of regenerative practice design is the re-centering of human environments, learning environments, pedagogies, and services towards reconnection, decolonization, and just action now. The short paper outlines a design framework for the emergence of reconnection and being-in-relation as processes that support the decolonization between humans and with more-than-human nature.

Eco-social transformation; relationships; nature; decolonization

1. Introduction

Regenerative practice is a theory of transformative practice which centers reconnection and being-in-relation as key practices of eco-social change in societies of the global North. It is a practical theory of social change that theorizes the interlinking of the earth’s natural ecosystem, social relations and individual well-being. This short paper outlines a design framework for the emergence of reconnection and being-in-relation as processes that support the decolonization between humans and with more-than-human nature (Or, 2021).

Regenerative practice builds on the understanding that a paradigm shift in the relationship of humans to other humans and to more-than-human nature is necessary to achieve global eco-social transformation. The concept of regeneration defines processes that restore, renew, or revitalize their own sources of energy and materials. Different applied fields are currently trying to remedy the extractive relationship of humans with more-than-human nature that has developed in capitalist-modernist civilization during the
last 1500 years with regenerative approaches. These regenerative approaches understand the planetary crises of the Anthropocene as a result of this extractive relationship. As a hot topic, regenerative approaches have been emerging across a range of fields including sustainable agriculture, urban planning, or landscape design, regenerative leadership, regenerative economy, and regenerative business (Eisenstein, 2018; Pedersen, 2018; Hutchins&Storm, 2019; Sanford, 2020).

2. Regenerative Approaches

Regeneration is currently also being reinvented in new and creative ways to also address the regeneration of cultures, societies and human relationships. The key qualities of regenerative culture are connection and being in relationship. Regenerative approaches assume that transforming our relationships will inevitably lead to changing the way we live, choose, and consume in the world. They recognize that humans are nature themselves (Reed, 2007) and that humanity and more-than-human nature are in a mutually beneficial relationship (Mang&Reed, 2012; Whitmee et al., 2015). Regenerative approaches to culture and society are not really new: they have existed for 200,000 years in the form of bioregionally adapted cultures that inhabited their respective ecosystems and created sustainable communities (Wahl, 2016). Importantly, however, in current reiterations of the concept, its indigenous origins are being lost, thus repeating a classic cycle of appropriation of indigenous knowledge and practices. Indigenous, alternative, and first nations epistemologies, worldviews and practices have for thousands of years framed nurturing relationship between humans, nature, and others as central to human and planetary health (Hanh, 2008; Lwanga-Thomson, 2015; Brazier, 2018; Cull et al., 2018; UNNBQ, 2019; Mayaka&Truell, 2021). As part of a decolonial agenda, the origins of the concept in their full scope need to be acknowledged (Young& Yunkaporta, 2021). In addition, I want to acknowledge the important work done by oppressed communities and activists in advancing practices and theorizing them (Black Lives Matter, 2020; Jade, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). My thinking here builds on the work done by this large collective of communities and activists for social change.

My interest is to understand how we can make the concept of regeneration work for the 21st century, without appropriating it, without decontextualizing it from its indigenous roots, and without erasing its radical scope. What could a third kind of regeneration look like? I want introduce regenerative practice as a framework that attempts to meet this challenge. Regenerative practice as a framework addresses specifically the connection between inner and outer transformation. Its objective is to facilitate the reconnection to one’s embodied self, other humans, and more-than-human nature as practice of political change. How can we then translate this framework into design processes to be applied in the design of social interventions?

3. Regenerative Practice as Transformative Design Framework

The objective of regenerative practice design is the re-centering of human environments, learning environments, pedagogies, and services towards reconnection, decolonization, and just action now. The regenerative practice design framework is process-oriented and aims to create conditions, structures, and processes for the emergence of salutogenic properties (Wahl, 2016). Thus, rather than teaching or prescribing, structures and processes that promote regeneration are intended to facilitate collective emergence, i.e., the design structures and processes are intended to enable individuals and communities to reconnect, relate, and see themselves as part of a larger web of life. The approach foregrounds the radical reach of a biocentric, care-focused perspective. A culture of caring and self-care as “planetary
transformational work," as well as an awareness that inner healing and outer political change are interconnected, sit at its core.

Regenerative design addresses three dimensions of practice: The first dimension – reconnecting – focuses on the reconnection of individuals with their embodied selves, with other people and with more-than-human nature, and foregrounds being-in-relation as a transformational practice. This is the very essence of regeneration work. Extending our awareness of connectedness from just our nearest and dearest to more-than-human nature and the whole of human society means including all the people and communities from whom we have been separated in our empathic resonance. Practices of reconnection include activities that activate and reconnect at the cellular level and at the level of immediate physical, felt, and emotional experience. They aim at embodied “nature-feeling” and “self-feeling” (Petzold, 2019). The intervention methods of reconnecting and being in relationship can take place in individual work or in a group. They include nature therapy, nature-based social work, ecosomatics, expressive writing, creativity therapies (expressive arts), and other integrative approaches.

The second dimension of regenerative practice – decolonization - is about reflecting on the social structures of inequality and injustice that separate people from each other and from more-than-human nature. Decolonization in practice means questioning the invisible and visible practices and structures that maintain inequalities, and dismantling them. Decolonization means coming into just relationship with other humans and with more-than-human nature - be it oppressed communities or dying rainforests. It is about eliminating systems that don't work and designing systems and policies of care and reciprocity. People who seek to decolonize explore social and anthropocentric structures of inequality and injustice and recognize how these structures are embedded in their bodies, minds, and hearts.

Practices of decolonization can relate to the communities and places we work with (e.g., colonial naming in neighborhoods or urban food deserts), to our profession (e.g., institutional structures of power and domination, demarcation and division, colonial continuities), or to ourselves (e.g., self-image and other-image, images and perceptions of nature, capacities and inabilities for empathy, our own experiences of privilege or exclusion). The work of decolonization requires reconnection as a prior step, because in order for us to truly see and understand inequality, we must be able to perceive the pain of oppression experienced by ourselves or others. Methods that enable decolonization include participatory and emancipatory methods, social justice, political somatics (Menakem, 2017), emotional and healing justice (Haines, 2019), restorative justice, transformative justice that addresses systemic transformation (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020), and design justice (Constanza-Chock, 2020).

The third dimension of regenerative practice, Just Action Now, focuses on creating just structures in decentralized nodes of change, where change is accomplished in real time through direct actions or events, in initiatives, or in community groups. The goal is to put the first two phases into practice by creating structures for action in the present.

Regenerative practice no longer aims to create conditions under which change can - possibly - occur in the future, but emphasizes that change must occur through action in the now. Thus, we cannot wait for governments to address this change first. Rather, it is community action that initiates change, and governments may follow that action. We "Do It Together" (DIT), decolonizing internalized structures of governmentality that manifest in political passivity and a lack of belief that we can change things ourselves. By doing it together, we build on existing knowledge, expertise, and practices in our communities. By coming together, we have collective impact. In this way, implementing actions for eco-social change simultaneously serves as a tool for individual and community regeneration. By pointing out socially unjust and anthropocentric structures and working to change them, we empower ourselves. There are so many opportunities to act right now, and everyone is needed. The changes achieved then directly
impact the life experiences of everyone involved. By working with others and witnessing the change we have fought for, we experience the immediate, embodied benefits of those changes: better connections, relationships, well-being, and empowerment.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the regenerative practice approach presents a vision for new directions in the design of human environments. By practicing and developing regenerative practices, we take responsibility for learning from the systemic mistakes of our past and orienting our designs for society toward a regenerative future. Eco-social transformation, understood from the standpoint of regenerative practice, is centrally built on the regeneration of relationships with the embodied self, with other humans, and with more-than-human nature. By becoming aware of our being in the web of life, we make an ontological shift that is the foundation for any meaningful eco-social transformation. Regenerative practice, when understood as part of such a larger political project of liberation and decolonization in the societies of the global North, is then neither merely remedial or reactive, but proactive and deeply political.

5. References

5.1. Citation Diversity Statement

As author of this short article, I see diversity of voices and epistemologies in research as an important means for the development of research and eco-social transformation. In preparing this text, I have sought diversity and reviewed which publications by minoritized scholars and non-scholars have addressed the issues which are discussed here.

I chose the diversity indicators of non-dominant ethnic background, gender, and non-scholar, and evaluated the fairness of my citations by counting the number of first and co-authors and inferring ethnic minoritization and gender based on name ("read as"), and non-scholar status based on institutional affiliation and kinds of publication. I acknowledge the difficulties and limitations of attributing any affiliations based on name. However, I also understand that hegemonic processes of knowledge production are based exactly on these processes of marking, and therefore make an effort to make these processes visible, and thus – hopefully – turn them around. Of the works cited here, 43% of the first authors were read as female, and 34% as ethnically minoritized. Among the co-authors, 50% were read as female and 62% as ethnically minoritized. 21% were read by me as non-academics. Based on the analysis of my citations, I believe my citation practices are fair, but room exists to expand them further. I am committing myself to improving equitable practices in science.

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**About the Author**

**Yari Or (she/her),** researcher, educator, activist, writer. Grew up as 2nd generation immigrant & Holocaust survivor in Germany. Yari was trained as an anthropologist (at the Freie Universität Berlin, the University of Chicago, and at UCLA) and as a learning scientist (at Northwestern University, Ph.D. 2007), thus connecting socio-cultural, developmental, and educational perspectives in the study of youth development. Her interests lie in the development of new methods for transformative practice in Social Work, Positive Youth Development, eco-social transformation, and nature-based social work.