Science and activism… friends or foes?

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Outline

- Science: from ivory tower to co-creation to activism (and back)
- Typology of actions while doing and communicating about your research
- Roles of scientists in polarised debates
- Implications & discussion

Programme

- 14.45 – 15.00 Introduction to the topic
- 15.00 – 15.15 Group discussions (based on your experience!)
- 15.15 – 15.30 Plenary reflections
- 15.30 – 15.45 Some considerations to take home on science & activism

Changing expectations from science

- Knowledge society, but scientific knowledge also increasingly contested
- Society demands that knowledge institutes ‘open up’
- In response, the scientific community has increased its efforts to engage with society in more direct ways

- Living labs
- Citizen’s science
- Co-creation
- Transdisciplinary research
- Dialogue
- Science activism

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Risks of science-society entanglement in polarised debates

- More science does not solve the problem …
- Risk of stealth advocacy
- Need to reflect on
  - how values influence our work as scientists
  - What role is appropriate in which situation

What do advice the government on balancing agriculture, recreation and protection of endangered species?

What to advice the MoA on whether to allow glyphosate for another 10 years?

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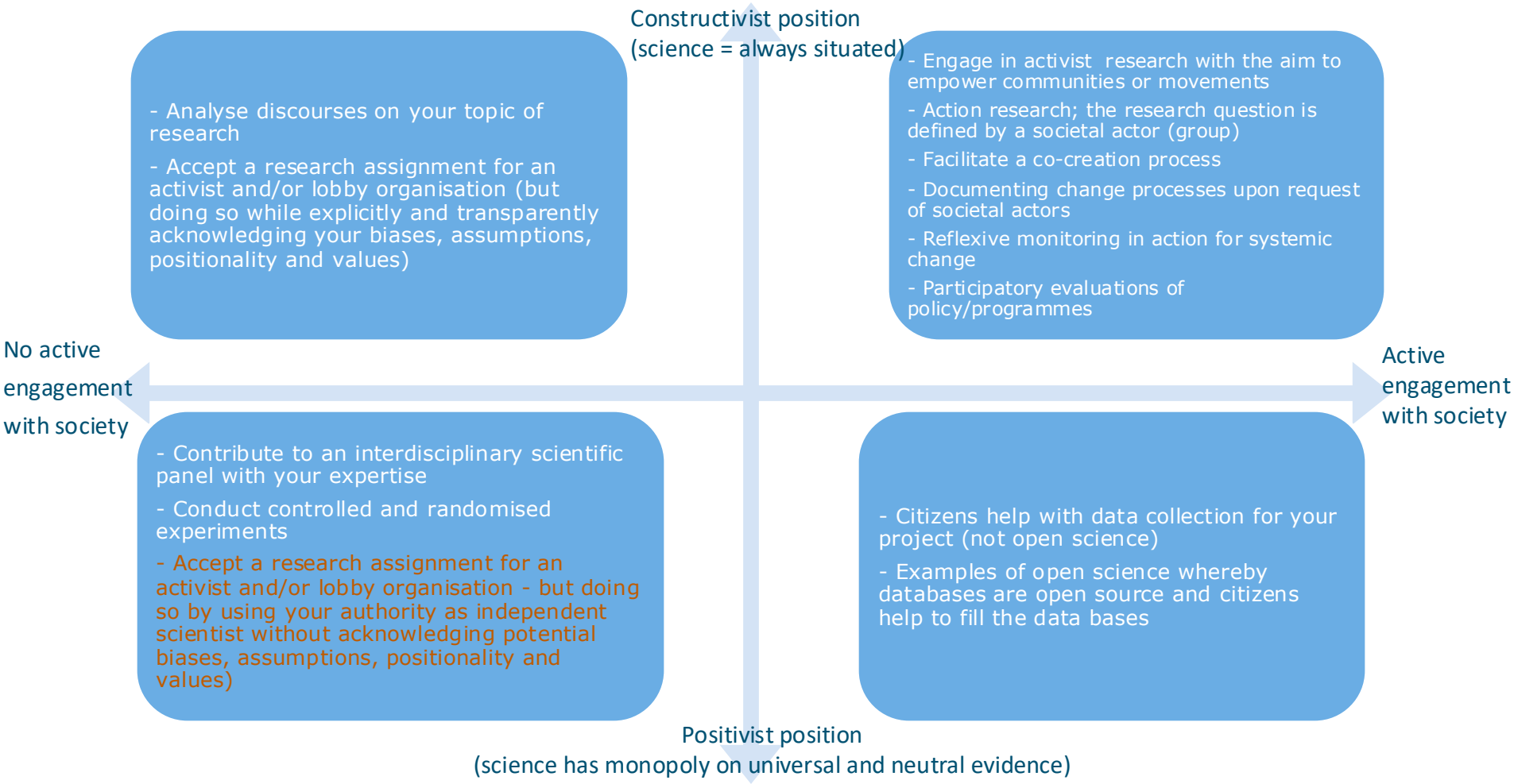
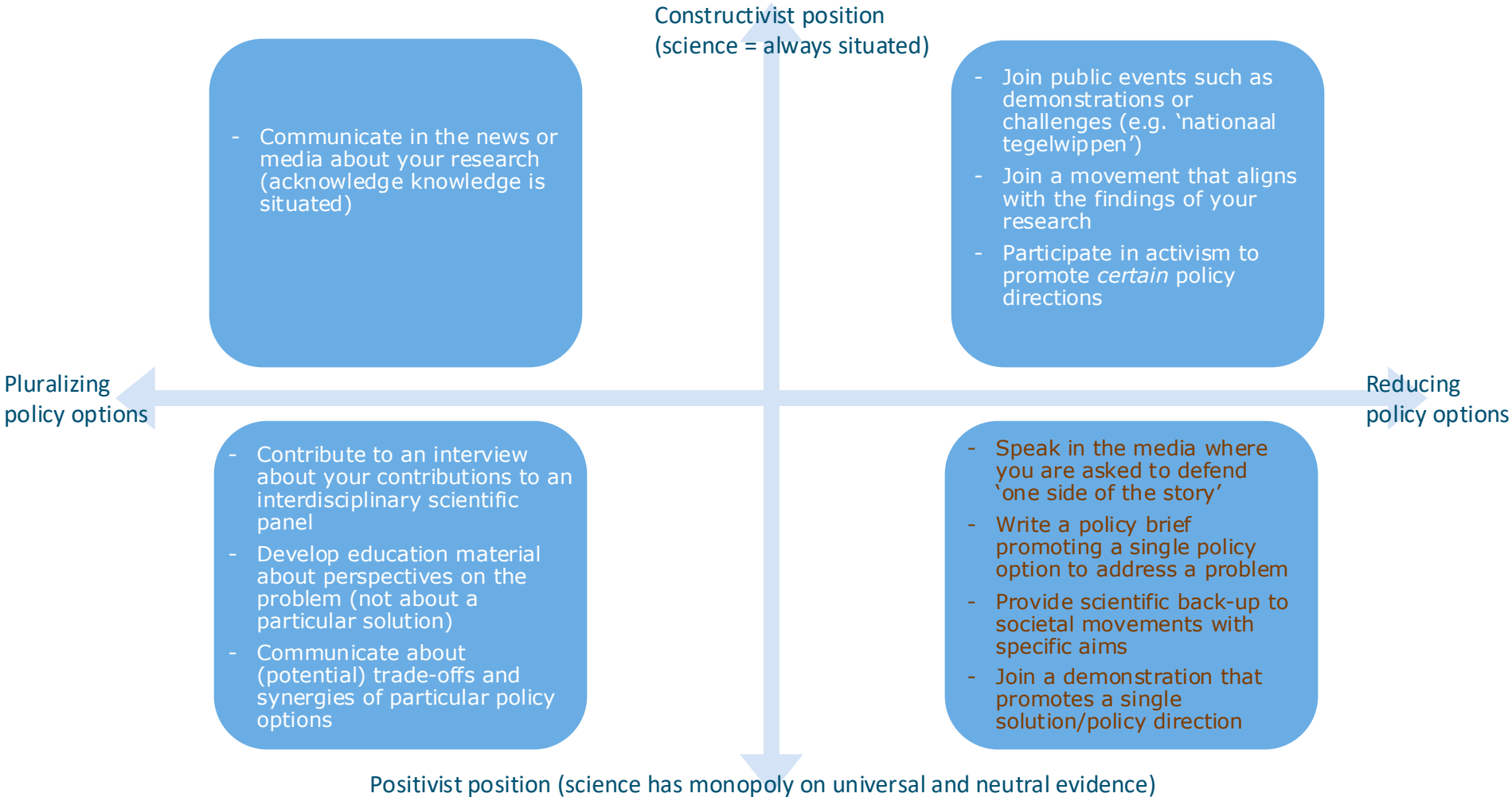
Examples of actions in ***doing your research***



Examples of actions in ***communicating about your research***



Roles of scientists

- **Pure scientist**: produces basic facts with academic methods – others may use this knowledge.
- **Science arbiter**: demonstrates and advices - upon request - what we know about a certain topic and how this knowledge may be applicable to the issue at stake.

Why is it important? How does it work?

"fact checker" Who is right? What do we know, what is uncertain, what is contested?

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Source: Pielke (2007) The Honest Broker; Making sense of science in policy and politics

Roles of scientists

- **Issue advocate:** gives recommendations about one side of the issue to a specific party (e.g. a lobby organization). Uses scientific knowledge to develop recommendations or advocates particular solutions.
- **Honest broker:** demonstrates what different policy options are possible based on an inventory of societal needs, academic facts and uncertainties

What scientific facts support claim x?

What can different scientific perspectives add? What is contested? What alternative policy options can we think of?

Example in sustainable water governance:

https://i2insights.org/2016/11/22/advocate-or-honest-broker/

Roles of scientists (continued)

- **Participatory knowledge (co)-creator:** brings together and integrates different types of knowledge – both scientific and non-scientific - about a given topic in transdisciplinary and co-creation processes (Turnhout et al 2013)

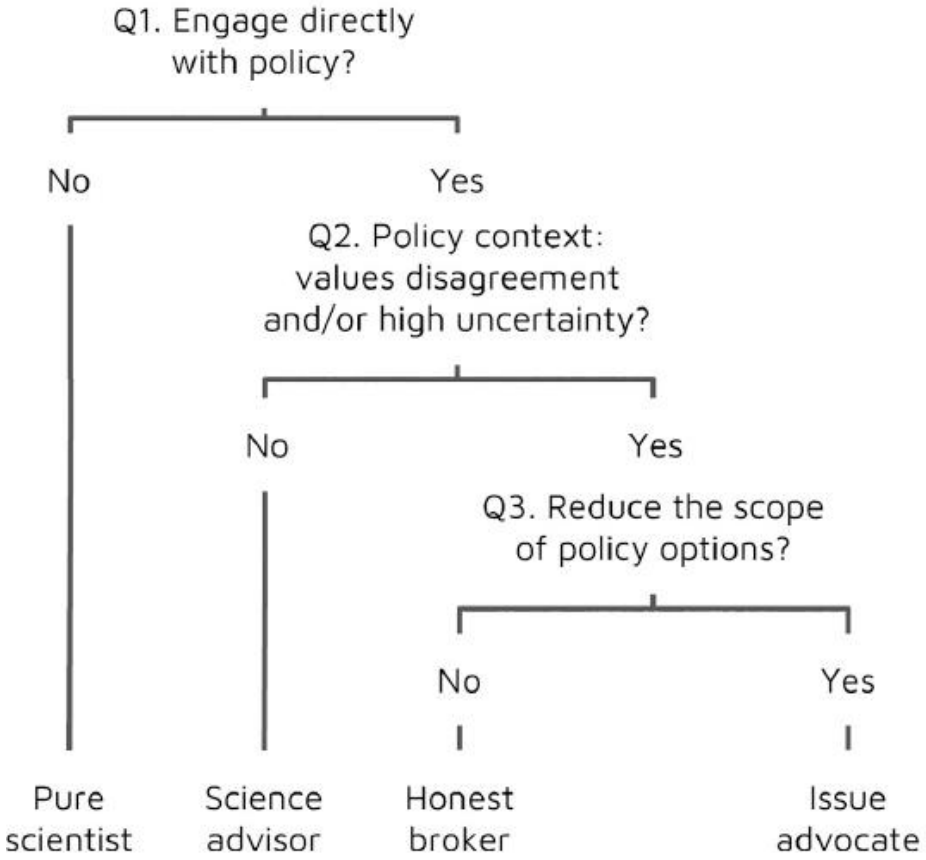
Which role do you feel most comfortable with?

Role	Summary
Pure scientist	Basic science, no interest in policy influence or societal relevance
Science arbiter	Pros and cons of a certain claim (upon request), fact checker
Issue advocate	Bring in the facts in support of claim x, conduct research from a single perspective upon request of societal actor/private sector
Honest broker	Interdisciplinary panels, Increase policy options (only scientific expertise)
Participatory knowledge co-creator	In transdisciplinary processes, create new knowledge with societal actors

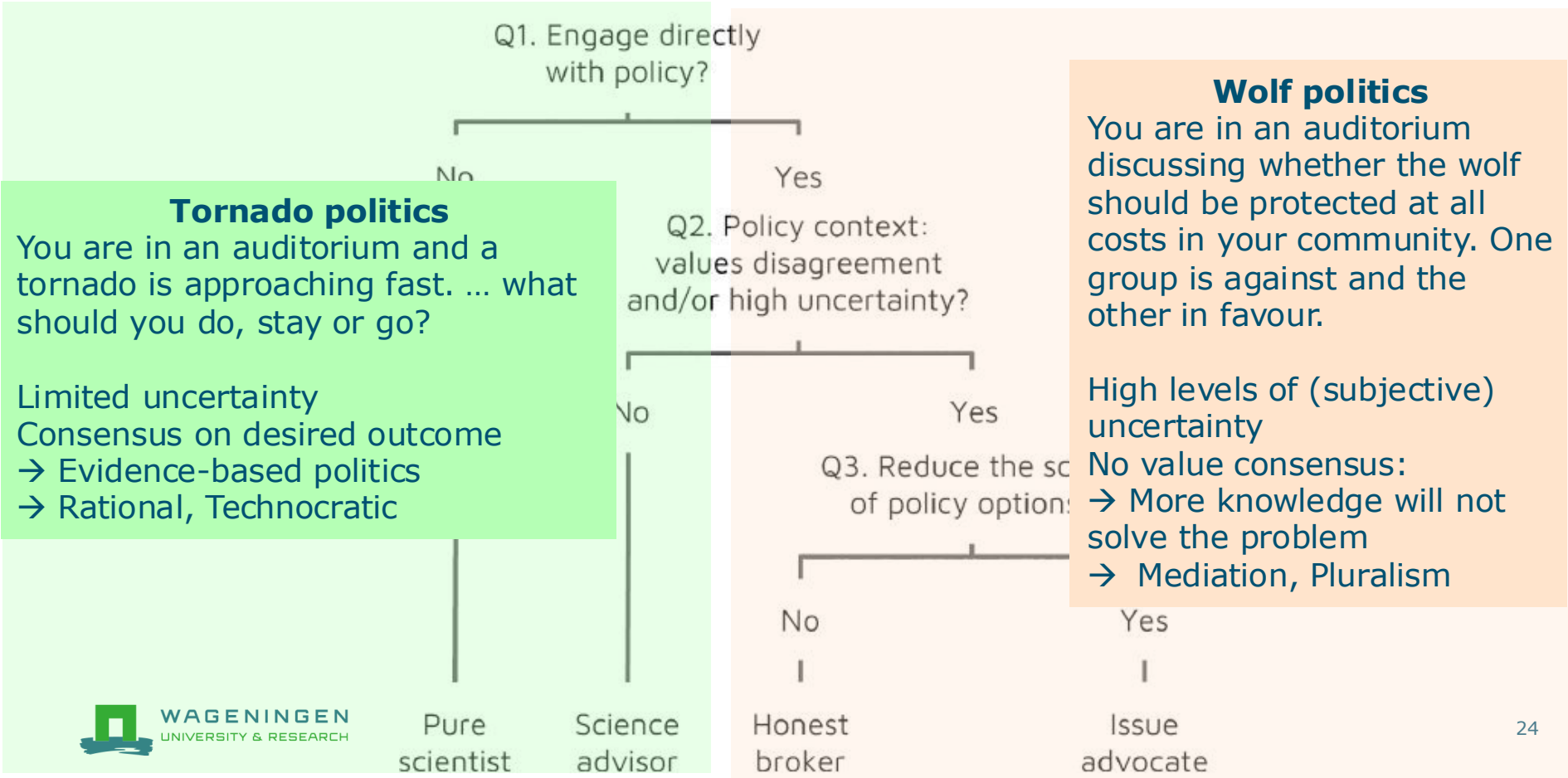
Group reflections

- Pick a topic that is
  - contested within science … (high uncertainties, disagreement on the science)
  - Surrounded with conflicting views within society (and political parties)
- Discuss the advantages and risks of :
  - Honest broker (group 1)
  - Issue advocate (group 2)
  - Participatory co-creator (group 3)

When is which role appropriate?



Tornado politics and wolf politics



Tornado politics

You are in an auditorium and a tornado is approaching fast. … what should you do, stay or go?

Limited uncertainty
Consensus on desired outcome
→ Evidence-based politics
→ Rational, Technocratic

Wolf politics

You are in an auditorium discussing whether the wolf should be protected at all costs in your community. One group is against and the other in favour.

High levels of (subjective) uncertainty
No value consensus:
→ More knowledge will not solve the problem
→ Mediation, Pluralism

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Example of stealth advocacy: extinction prevention in conservation biology

- Which species to include on list of endangered species is informed by science…
- BUT determining extinction risk is based on value judgements
- AND protecting species comes with certain costs and trade-offs…
- Using 'extinction denial' or claiming that decisions which species to protect are 'evidence-based' or 'objective' is stealth advocacy
- Perhaps linking the need to protect species to a specific (left-wing progressive) world view, makes their protection less likely…?

Example based on: Cardou and Vellend, 2023

Conclusions – take aways

- Assess the level of certainty and value consensus around your topic
  - In case of uncertainty and value conflict → refer to abortion politics!
- Be aware how your engagement actions may be perceived by the public
- One may change roles once the situation changes!
- Individual researcher vs WUR as institute
- When in doubt - discuss with colleagues (in particular those with other views!) or supervisor
- Be transparent about the role you take

The end…

More info?

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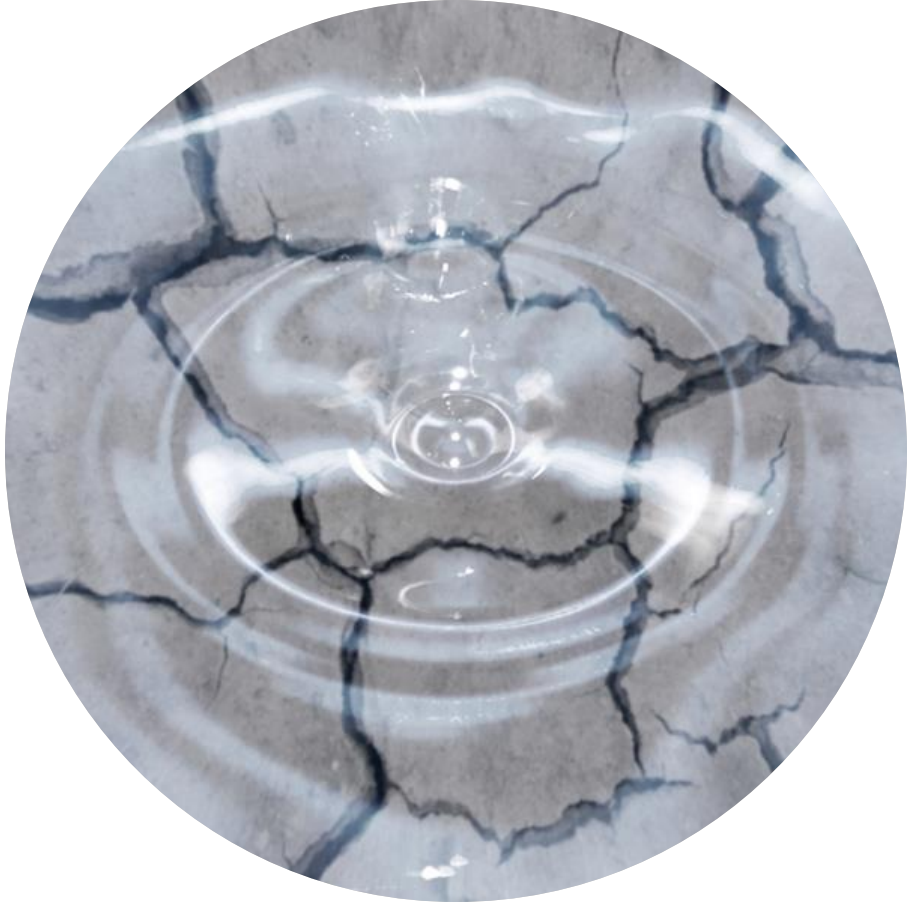

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