

# What Kind of Talk Does Resilience Need? Mapping Conversations about Vulnerability and Resilience in a Time of Uncertainty

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## Overview

Using a 'cooperative inquiry' methodology, this project seeks to engage students and staff from the Department of Peace Studies in an action research process to map and reflect on the scope, nature and impact of conversations we have about 'vulnerability' and 'resilience'.

## Rationale

- a) This research project starts from the assumption that we live in a dynamic and rapidly changing world. Any notion that political, economic, cultural and ecological systems were broadly stable and 'secure' is increasingly untenable in the face of current global trends – including climate change and wider environmental degradation, population growth, resource depletion/competition, economic crisis, etc. The precise trajectory and consequences of these trends are uncertain, but there is widespread agreement on the *potential* for profound changes to our ways of life, and that these might involve violence and suffering on a significant scale.
- b) The ways that people think about and respond to vulnerabilities in their own lives is itself a crucial factor in whether they – and the social communities to which they belong - can become more *resilient*: able to adapt to change without violence.<sup>1</sup> Exploring ideas and beliefs is relevant for the following reasons:

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<sup>1</sup> Resilience as a concept can be located in a range of disciplines, most notably ecology, psychology, 'disaster-studies', and – more recently – development studies. It is also part of the vocabulary in 'permaculture', the transition towns movement, and increasingly in policy discourse. Although there are important differences in how resilience is defined and employed within these different areas of study (and although there is still work to do to determine what resilience might mean in the current context), resilience generally refers to the capacity of something (a social-ecological system, an individual or community, social infrastructure, etc) to absorb change or disturbance, whilst maintaining its essential functioning. From a Peace Studies perspective, resilience might have a more normative meaning.

- i. Different frameworks for understanding current uncertainties imply or promote different kinds of responses. For example, a distinction can be drawn between those frameworks that assume 'business-as-usual is possible, with modifications (e.g. addressing climate change or 'peak oil' through technological innovation), and those that assume a significant transformation of social, cultural and political systems is necessary (e.g. protecting the ecological systems upon which humanity depends will only be possible through radical change in lifestyles) .
  - ii. The space for political action – particularly by government - is related to the nature of public understanding and discourse about current uncertainties, vulnerabilities and options for response. Assuming government
  - iii. Citizens' attitudes and dispositions may play critical role in determining responses to change, particularly in a time of crisis (Kearns, 2008).
  - iv. Critical engagement with prevailing ways of thinking, acting and being can encourage and support transitions away from a 'politics of unsustainability' (Bluhdorn and Welsh, 2007).
- c) In this context, both private and public conversations about the challenges we face, and about how we might respond to them, are urgently needed.
- d) Public conversation about current uncertainties/vulnerabilities is often limited and difficult. Recent assessments of the state of public conversations concerned with climate change and related issues (IPPR, 2008; Carnegie UK, 2007; Carnegie UK/New Economics Foundation, 2008?; Few et. al., 2006; Hopkins, 2008) suggest there is limited political space (narrow range of discourse and few opportunities to engage critically with existing paradigms); there is uneven engagement across different social groups (e.g. concern about the environment is higher among white middle class); there are tensions between open-ended participation and strategic decision-making (allowing time and space for inclusive dialogue, versus the need for leadership 'from above); and there are psychological barriers to engagement (e.g. resistance to unwelcome information (violent futures), personal and social forms of denial, etc). Uncertainty about the future can create a barrier to engagement in the present, as the perceived need for reflection and action is deferred.
- e) Conversations at a more private level can also be challenging. Reflection on personal experience suggests that it can be very difficult to initiate and sustain conversations about issues that are genuinely unsettling, particularly outside our 'comfort zones' (people whose concerns and responses are similar to our own). Differences in knowledge, perspective and interest, as well as in 'discursive competence' (skills in initiating and sustaining dialogue) all bear upon the nature of conversation with others.
- f) Because of this, it is important to ask how individuals and communities can be engaged in reflection on current uncertainties/vulnerabilities in ways that build rather than undermine resilience. Or to put it another way, what kind of talk does resilience need?

## Research Objectives

- To identify where conversations about ‘vulnerability and resilience’ do or do not happen, and to identify explanations for this;
- To understand the nature/character of conversations, and the extent to which they might build or undermine resilience;
- To identify what kinds of changes – if any – arise through conversations, and whether any changes can be considered ‘transformative’<sup>2</sup>;
- To identify which approaches to ‘conversation’ are most ‘productive’ – i.e. which encourage new ways of seeing and thinking, acting and being.

## Research Methodology

The methodology we will adopt for this project is ‘cooperative inquiry’, a form/expression of collaborative action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Briefly, cooperative inquiry draws together individuals with shared interests, to explore and make sense of the world, and to learn how develop and take action for change. Its aim or purpose is therefore not limited to the pursuit of knowledge per se, but to engage knowledge for practical effect: “A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased wellbeing— economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part (Reason, 2002).

Cooperative inquiry is a *participatory* methodology which respects the agency and intelligence of individuals as capable researchers (rather than viewing research as the preserve of trained professionals). “Fundamentally, if one accepts that human persons are agents who act in the world on the basis of their own sensemaking; and that human community involves mutual sensemaking and collective action, it is no longer possible to do research on persons. It is only possible to do research with persons, including them both in the questioning and sensemaking that informs the research, and in the action which is the focus of the research.” (Reason and Torbert, 2001) It follows, then, that those involved in co-operative inquiry (including academics) are identified as co-researchers “whose thinking and decision-making contributes to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience”. They are also co-subjects “participating in the activity that is being researched” and a focus of inquiry itself.” (Reason, 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> According to Mezirow (and others) transformative learning occurs when existing frames of reference (beliefs, assumptions, worldviews) and habits of thought and behaviour brought into question, prompting a purposeful process of critical self-reflection, leading to deep, structural shifts in perspective and being. Transformation is therefore indicated not by fairly superficial changes in understanding, where potentially disruptive information can be accommodated within existing frames of reference. Rather, it describes a more profound process of reflection and change, leading to a different self-understanding and new forms of behaviour

Crucially for this project, cooperative inquiry highlights three dimensions of inquiry. First-order research involves “critical examination of day-to-day behaviour, drawing on qualities of mindfulness and self-awareness to notice critically the impact of one’s actions in the wider world and the congruence or incongruence of one’s behaviour with purposes or espoused theories” (Reason and Torbert, 2001). Thus, it is principally concerned with self and being, and the changes that occur at this level. This resonates with our interest in whether the researchers in this project might be changed by their participation in it. Second-order research is “when we engage with others in a face-to-face group to enhance our respective first-person inquiries” (Reason and Torbert, 2001). This recognises (again) the social, relational nature of inquiry, and will be reflected in the collective nature of this research process – the opportunities for collaboration and reflection. Third-order research/practice “attempts to create conditions which awaken and support the inquiring qualities of first- and second-person research/practice in a wider community, thus empowering participants to create their own knowing-in-action in collaboration with others” (Reason and Torbert, 2001). This entails more deliberate actions aimed at broadening the effects of inquiry at the other two levels – for example, through the creation of a dialogue process. Informed by this distinction, then, this project will (hopefully) promote inquiry at all three levels.

### **Research Process**

Participants will be invited to a 3-day workshop process (October 27<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> 2008), during which we will begin a conversation amongst ourselves on the question ‘what kind of talk does resilience need?’ This will involve reflection on current conceptions of vulnerability and resilience, as well as engagement with related academic and social discourses. The purpose here will be to explore amongst ourselves the challenges of talking about current uncertainties, reactions to different information and concepts, and to identify areas of common ground and divergence. We will also look at different models for engaging people in thinking about current uncertainties, and for promoting dialogue and change around relevant topics (environment, social justice, etc). The purpose here will be to develop a shared understanding of what dialogue entails, and to reflect on the challenge of realising this in private and public conversations. Third, the group will reflect on possibilities for developing actions based on involvement in the workshops, what they might need to support these actions, and how actions might be researched. These could be informal, more or less spontaneous conversations with family, friends or colleagues, conversations that arise in the course of the students’ existing actions, or ‘conversations’ that are generated through the creation of specific fora for dialogue and deliberation. All ‘conversations’ we will frame as types of ‘action’ which can be the focus of research. Finally, we will aim to foster a sound shared understanding of the core methodology – cooperative inquiry – and its implications for relationships, processes and outcomes associated with the research project.

After the induction week, participants will be encouraged to pursue their own projects, keeping in touch with the group through meetings and electronic communication – i.e. project website / wiki. At the end of January 2009, a second workshop will be arranged with the purpose of sharing and reflecting on experience, and identifying next steps for the project (including dissemination and writing-up).

Participant-researchers will be asked to engage in different forms of documentation and reflection relating to these conversations: documentation of the conversations themselves; keeping research diaries which record and reflect on the research process, participation in the project, their own reactions or change; group conversations about the research and research outcomes.

In summary, this project aims to combine educational, research and action elements in a process to examine the kinds of talk needed for resilience.<sup>3</sup> It will provide opportunities for experiential learning, skill development, and for first, second and third order research/practice – engaging ourselves, other participants, and wider communities.

While being a self-contained piece of work, it is also intended as a pilot project that we hope can be extended to involve participant-researchers from outside the University – thus going further beyond our own ‘comfort zones’.

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of, and reflections on, a project that included similar elements in a higher education context with a central focus on deliberation, see Harriger and McMillan, 2005 and 2007.

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