RESILIENCE, COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

People, Place, Practice, Power, Politics and Possibility in Transition

Edited by
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4.1. Open Space Write-up: Resilience, Community Action and Social Transformation

TRANSITION RESEARCH NETWORK; WRITE-UP BY THOMAS HENFREY

This chapter reports on a parallel session at the Resilience 2014 conference on Tuesday May 6th 2014 in Montpellier, France. The session aimed to examine relationships and interactions between practitioners' situated and experiential knowledge and the more abstract and theoretical understandings of resilience researchers in a range of disciplines.

Figure 4.1.1 – *Open Space Session.*

Figure 4.1.2 – *Mutual Learning from Transition and Resilience Research. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.*

The session was convened by ECOLISE, the European Network of Community-Led Initiatives on Sustainability and Climate Change, whose member organisations have up to 50 years of practical experience in promoting, creating and living within sustainable communities. It was organised by practitioners and action researchers within grassroots movements for resilience: Tom Henfrey, coordinator of the Transition Research Network and Researcher at the Schumacher Institute for Sustainable Systems in Bristol, UK; Juan del Rio of the Spanish national Transition hub; Lorenzo Chelleri of the Barcelona Autonomous University; Gesa Maschkowski, a PhD researcher at Bonn University and member of the German Transition Network; and Glen Kuecker, history professor at de Pauw University in Indiana and active supporter of indigenous struggles in Latin America.

About 30 researchers and practitioners attended. Following brief presentations from Maschkowski, Chelleri/del Rio and Kuecker (respectively the basis of Chapters 3.1, 2.2 and 4.3 in this collection), it adopted an interactive discussion format based on Open Space technology. Within the general theme of resilience and community action, all present were invited to propose discussion topics. The group agreed on four questions:

1. What can transition movements and resilience research learn from each other?

2. Measurement versus process – what are the ways forward?
This is a reaction to the emphasis on large-scale quantified measurement in some of the other sessions, and might link to the next question on resistant institutions.

3. Working with and within Resistant Institutions.
How to bring ideas of 'the salutogenetic way' into institutions and planning? How to release resilience or transition understanding into resistant institutions?

4. Drivers for Involvement in Transition
Going beyond the salutogenetic approach, which is very important but can't explain everything:
What are the main drivers of people's involvement in Transition initiatives?
How can the resilience assessment methodology employ the sense of coherence mentioned?
To what extent are motivations of instigators the same as the drivers of people involved in the broader movement?

People formed breakout groups around each of these questions. Everyone present initially joined the table whose question most interested them. People were free to move to another table at any point – though in fact in this session nobody did. After a 20-minute discussion, one participant from each breakout fed key points back to the group as a whole. Breakout sessions were recorded: sections 4.1.1 to 4.1.3 are based on transcripts of these recordings; 4.1.4 (whose recording was inaudible) has been reconstructed from notes taken during the session.

4.1.1. What Can Transition Movements and Resilience Research Learn from Each Other?

Summary:
1. Having clearly stated goals and agendas means Transition practice tends to employ specific and normative concepts of resilience. Researchers tend to use resilience in ways that are more general and conceptual but that may obscure hidden norms and values.

2. Transformative agendas in Transition imply a need to question many established norms and values. Some resilience research does the same, but much employs a more conservative discourse of 'bouncing back'.

3. Transition is a social experiment based on learning by doing whereas research tends to involve learning by observation [and analysis].

4. Researchers and the Transition movement are already learning from each other in important ways.

Revealing and challenging hidden politics of meaning behind different uses of resilience.
Following a point that came up in a session on urban transformations the previous day: there's a tendency to use resilience as if it was a normative concept that implies positive values, and that isn't necessarily true. In Transition there is a clear and explicit set of objectives relating to sustainability and wellbeing in the face of declining net availability of energy, climate change, and financial instability. This implies a very specific type of resilience and a clear trajectory towards it involving things like self-reliance, building community through collective

action, and promoting equality. Resilience thinking in a technical sense is a framework that can be applied towards many different ends that may reflect very different sets of values and desired objectives.

So if researchers and resilience practitioners want to talk about resilience, they have to under-stand they are talking about different things. These differences of definition can support really instructive interchanges. The bigger picture provided by researchers helps us understand that Transition and other forms of community action aren't about building resilience in neoliberal structures as some of the politically dominant discourses on resilience seek to do. Transition gives researchers a clear picture of what a resilience-building agenda based on explicit environmental and social values looks like, and forces researchers to take account of the hidden values that might influence the conduct and application of their research.

Understanding Interactions Across Scales and other Key Differences

One of the useful things about technical concepts of resilience is that they involve *Panarchies:* nested systems at different spatial scales, and interactions in both directions across these scales. So it takes into account influences that local scales can exert at higher levels, and how broader scales influence local action. Transition initiatives usually emphasise practical work at local scales: it doesn't of course ignore larger scales, but the local focus tends to be more prominent. Research places greater emphasis on theory and does not privilege any particular scale. This can perhaps help practice to remain attentive to its cross-scale dimensions.

Researchers tend to learn by watching those who are learning by doing and that perhaps gives them a different perspective. But all are part of a great societal experiment in which resilience is the key guiding concept, and in which all the different learning processes involved follow the adaptive cycle.

Following on from the previous point, different actors, whether at the same and different scales, will have different ideas about resilience and agendas for achieving it that reflect differences in their outlooks and interests. Bottom-up and top-down action for resilience are often motivated by very different goals, or there's scope for great conflict between commu-nity-based action and municipal initiatives. Resilience thinking provides a way to understand those cross-scale actions better, and understand trade-offs between the interests of different actors and at different scales, and potential conflicts and synergies that arise.

This also relates to relationships between resilience and transformation. Many of the common definitions of resilience are so much about bouncing back, maintaining structures and identity of the system, whether that's the community or something else, but resilience is also about the capacity to change and deal with uncertain outcomes. So one of the questions a Transition initiative is asking is how to maintain the core structures and functions of a community or system and at the same time maintain a capacity to change and go forward without knowing the future. In looking for practical answers to this question, it identifies needs for change in parts of the system which are no longer useful, viable or desirable, so in practice Transition implies a need for transformation. This seems different from how many researchers use the term transition in a technical sense, which tends to mean increases in efficiency and effectiveness, at times conservative but including addition of new structures and functions. Transformation is a deeper concept that involves questioning existing norms and ways of doing things the way the Transition movement is doing.

Another question this raises is who is to decide what change is desirable or necessary. So you have to think about who leads, who makes the decisions and in whose interests. This includes who becomes vulnerable – a resilient system will include areas whose vulnerability is beneficial to the system as a whole, so how do you make that trade-off?

Learning by Doing versus Learning through Observation and Analysis
Transition initiatives are community-scale attempts to address the local manifestations of

Figure 4.1.3 – *Measurement vs Process. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.*

global problems. So as we've already said, they have clear objectives and can frame a specific idea of resilience against those objectives. This of course implies a second set of questions about how to achieve that, and the solutions are very different in different places. A resilient food system for a major city in which relatively few people have access to land for cultivation will look very different from in a rural community. When Transition groups identify potential solutions, this allows them to offer suggestions to decision-makers. These suggestions can also be very useful for resilience researchers.

Research and practice can be closely interlinked. There is a research branch to the practical work, as people are learning by doing. Researchers tend to learn by watching those who are learning by doing and that perhaps gives them a different perspective. But all are part of a great societal experiment in which resilience is the key guiding concept, and in which all the different learning processes involved follow the adaptive cycle. Transition can be viewed as a self-conscious attempt to create an evolved form of resilience, based on learning from present challenges and the lessons of the past. It is inherently progressive – present day challenges differ from any we've faced before, and we won't solve them just by looking back. Return to a previous state would anyway not be possible or desirable because society has already transitioned to different ways of doing things, these ways have become culturally embedded, and people don't want to return to how things were.

Resilience is a framework that can help us understand how this Transition process might look, but it can't specify the details of solutions. So research and practice are completely integrated, inseparable in fact. More broadly, we could think of our current resilience as comprising the reservoir of social capital, ecological capital and knowledge – available to use at the moment and on which Transition needs to draw: resilience thinking is an important part of this.

4.1.2. Measurement versus Process

Summary:

1. Measurement can be a problem because it creates a fixed point, whereas resilience is about dealing with uncertainty: so if we try to measure resilience against something fixed we may not be measuring what we need. So the buzz around resilience may be a drive towards simplification that closes down possibilities rather than opening them up. This touches upon the more fundamental question about ways forward: the need to change things that are currently not sustainable

2. Questions of power and process are important – whether people are involved in measurement and assessment processes, and whether the work of researchers in any way contributes to the people they are working with. That's definitely true in Transition as a co-owned process – so it's more than just information-gathering as things are definitely happening after researchers leave.

3. Problems of scale – measurement and process at micro versus macro level, global versus local, scaling up and how to affect change at broader scales and over extended timescales.

Opening Up and Closing Down

There is a potential clash between attempts to measure resilience, especially in highly quantified ways, and the understanding of resilience (and resilience building) as ongoing dynamic processes that might be difficult to capture in a structured, scientific way.

Attempts at measurement and quantification can reduce resilience to some measurable, tangible attribute of the system in ways that are at odds with more process-oriented approaches. This is particularly true when the purpose of measurement is to improve the ability to control the system. When something is made measurable, it is made legible – visible, knowable - in ways that foreclose possibilities. In that process measuring may limit the system in important ways: defining what resilience is in a certain way to the exclusion of others, specifying what is to be measured and hence what is not to be measured, and limiting the way the system can develop or evolve in the future.

Benchmarking in order to measure and assess outcomes is also important here. When you benchmark you're specifying the goals and objectives, effectively setting future targets against which to measure progress towards resilience. Does that then exclude or deny possibilities for resilience in a way that contradicts the fluidity of the concept? The definition of resilience used is crucial here. If it refers to emergent properties of a complex system, like its regenerative capacity, does a defining benchmark proposition that makes things legible limit possibilities of future emergent properties? If that sets the system on a trajectory that denies certain possibilities, it limits the future options – and so reduces resilience. If resilience is the capacity to deal with situations that are unpredictable or can not be anticipated, that makes it really hard to measure anything meaningfully against a fixed reference point.

Brian Walker suggested in the morning plenary session that it makes no sense to define resilience as a goal that you want to reach. It's a far more open process, and that makes it extremely difficult to define criteria. It's also context-dependent, so changes in context over time make meaningful measurement and comparison far more difficult, perhaps even impossible. If in ten years you measure the same criteria but the context has changed, those criteria will no longer be relevant and what you measure will not have the same implications. So measurement may not be such a good idea. It's also important to address issues around timescales and the need for a long-term approach.

Clarification and Appropriate Methodology

On the other hand, attempts to define and measure resilience force a clarification of meaning. This can oppose the trend to use resilience as a buzzword whose meaning is inconsistent. For that reason it's important to operationalise certain concepts, but that needn't imply quantifying them in rigid ways. One alternative could be to use relative measures. There are some interesting concepts from network governance that could be used to assess community resilience. Innovative capacity is one: if you could measure this and meaningfully compare it across different communities, you might be able to say that one has a higher innovative capacity than another, and this is likely to mean it is more resilient. That's one of

many approaches we could potentially adapt. The question is how we interpret and apply our measures – not as absolute numbers, more as a relative moment in time. If we allow things to remain too fuzzy, there's risk like with sustainability that the concept loses all power.

If we explore ideas of qualitative measurement, this leads us into some interesting possibilities for constructing narratives: for example about the way you live or want to live, and about the possibilities that you see yourself being able to change. That makes comparison more difficult, but it's far more likely to be meaningful. There's a discussion about whose story gets told – and what becomes the prominent story – but in some ways those discussions are the whole point. I see the process question as basically a power question: who decides, what are the methods?

Innovative capacity is one interesting concept that could be used to assess community resilience: if you could measure this and meaningfully compare it across different communities, you might be able to say that one has a higher innovative capacity than another, and this is likely to mean it is more resilient.

We can avoid potential clashes between measurement and process, by being very careful about what we measure and how those measurements are interpreted. In some ways we need to make things more concrete and quantified measures can have a useful part to play in this. It is important to be very clear about what that can and can not tell us, to be careful about how the information is used and communicate clearly exactly what is being measured and why.

Scale and Timescale

Issues of scale can illustrate how inappropriate measurement – or interpretation of measurement – can narrow the analysis in a way that limits possibilities. For example, if you measure at a very large scale, you lose lots of important details of context. Large scales also depersonalise people's engagement with issues as the question, "What can I, as an individual, offer to this process?" gets lost. Talking about smaller scales where people have direct experiential knowledge of their system can be part of a process that is about more than itself: it creates something that will be taken out of the room and live on. This is an important point in all research: when researchers gather information, are they just extracting that information and leaving, or is it part of a process that will improve people's capacity to build resilience in the long term? It's important to look for ways in which local processes can both yield information and create something that remains in the community once the research if finished.

If the core question behind Transition is how we work together to change the world, there's perhaps a tension or contradiction with resilience. If resilience is defined as the ability to absorb shock without the system fundamentally changing, it may hinder the change that is necessary. So resilience might become part of the way the system perpetuates itself. Especially if we reinforce that by forms of measurement that lock the system into a certain path or direction, that may reproduce the system as it is rather than opening the possibilities needed for Transition to happen. It depends how resilience is defined: some definitions include the capacity to transform when the current system is no longer viable, or to anticipate a different system, or to work at a different organisational scale – for example, managing different communities at a regional level.

4.1.3. Working With and Within Resistant Institutions

Summary:

1. Those working within incumbent institutions or seeking to collaborate with them often experience deep-seated resistances to change that contrast with the liveliness and dynamism of Transition and other social movements.

2. Confronting and overcoming these institutional inertias requires courage, stamina and strategic action.

3. Bureaucracy can be as alive as any other part of the system, and a potential locus of activity as well as inertia – depending on the level of disconnect.

4. Normative biases can arise when we employ specific constructions of reality, implicitly or overtly linked to uses and definitions of particular terms – including 'resilience'.

Radicalism versus Inertia

Institutional inertia is a feature of many organisations working at community level. This can include research institutions, charities and large NGOs. People committed to positive change and working in institutions that are unwilling to accept the prospect of major societal transformation often experience powerful tensions, and find themselves surrounded by people who either don't fully grasp the need for change or are really frightened by the prospect. It's very difficult to bridge the gap between such situations and those in movements like Transition towns in which the need for transformation in current systems is widely accepted. When a single person or a small group contradicts a deep-rooted and powerful consensus against change it's easy to be marginalised or get squeezed out. A key task of people seeking to facilitate these bridging conservations is to help grassroots actors understand power, and so learn how to engage with and influence established institutions.

Some community-level stakeholder organisations such as local governments, schools, and established environmental groups tend to use key concepts such as sustainability in static or retrograde ways. Resilience is a more dynamic and less familiar concept, so it's possible its

Figure 4.1.4 – *Group Discussion. Credit: Gesa Maschkowski.*

use could encourage more flexible thinking and dialogue. This is by no means certain: fundamental change requires challenging many established world views, and success will always be limited if these world views continue to constrain possibilities.

The Courage to Work for Change – Some Experiences

What I'm seeing in my community is that as well as just speaking about or promoting change, it's important actually to do it: to demonstrate change through transformative projects like a community currency scheme. Then if after doing all this stuff you still have the time and energy, you can start to measure and evaluate: to ask whether it has led to any social change or affected dominant mindsets. We're just getting to that point in my community, and I was sponsored to come here to learn how to put that into a bigger context: how to take it further and be more influential when confronting the expertise that speaks against it. This takes a lot of courage: as a single volunteer sitting on the municipal table that represents 20 municipalities, it's not easy to speak out and not to be squashed by the dead hand of bureaucracy and the inertia it creates.

In my short experience as a city councilor I found the best way was just to turn up every day, to be there, and to see who supports me, slowly over time. We call that a dialogue of alignment, a strategy of slowly finding alignment among different stakeholders. Even if we have some fundamental disagreements, over time we can work out where we're aligned and so find ways of collaborating for change.

The Dead Hand of Bureaucracy, Living Hand of Social Action

Building on the theme of courage: I work in a very large organisation where people can hold onto their initial ideas very tightly. If you release your idea, it can often change into something that is more meaningful to the majority but not true to your original aim. This can be true in social movements as well as institutions, and can prevent an idea from reaching its full potential. So it's important to look at the social and organisational processes through which someone's idea turns into collective action.

There's a contrast between the dead hand of bureaucracy and a mode of working that allows things to happen as opposed to one that seeks to keep things a certain way. The difficulty is mobilising in a world of bureaucracy for a movement that is premised on very different means and organisational processes. The negotiation between them could be something like a research instrument, or activity instrument, and the negotiation between them can be quite profound. Another way of expressing it is simply to call it power.

Epistemology, Knowledge and Power

If we think about the question of how to bring the idea of salutogenesis into institutions, an important part of the answer is: with caution. What Gesa talked about was something different – simply a framework for communication about what people want from an organisation – the original idea follows quite a normative notion of 'what is health', and that is also true of community health. This raises a general point of the importance of being mindful of what constructions of reality particular ideas imply, and on that basis considering whether and how we want to bring them into institutions and the likely consequences. This is relevant to the whole

> *An example is the work of Phil Cass in Ohio: Over time they boiled their enquiry down to a single question: What is health? By asking that question to many people over an extended period they changed the health system.*

of the resilience discussion: resilience itself is a normative idea, we should be cautious with that. It's an example of post-colonial understanding of power and knowledge: the hidden power relations underlying how a term is defined and used, or even when you say 'they' rather than talk about what we need and what we want.

Another aspect of health is institutional health, the health of the whole organisation. We need to define health more broadly: in terms of wellbeing in addition to physical health, and in terms of the need for healthy systems. This will help us to apply these concepts more effectively to urgent questions. Implicit in this broader definition of health is to understand the factors that lead it to improve or decline: for instance how the health of the environment affects the health

of individuals, and the effects of inequality on everyone's health. An example is the work of Phil Cass in Ohio, a seven-year collaboration with a group of health providers. Over time they boiled their enquiry down to a single question: What is health? By asking that question to many people over an extended period they changed the health system.

All of these are examples of the more general challenges of stepping into a transdisciplinary space that requires you to adapt your own expertise to novel contexts and rely on the expertise of others in areas in which you may not be familiar. When ecologists and others with technical or scientific expertise have to work on engagement and partnerships, for example, it brings in questions of social change processes for which they might not have the relevant skills. It's much more difficult to work it out for yourself than bring in other people that already have those skills, but institutional inertia can often make it difficult to assemble multidisciplinary teams. This can often lead to simplified processes that simply drive certain agendas.

4.1.4. Drivers for Involvement in Transition

Motivations for involvement change over time: this is true both for individuals and for the group.

People get involved for reasons that may be different from those that motivate them to sustain their involvement. They themselves change, their situations change as a result of getting involved, and the groups and projects themselves change so that they offer different things.

So the people who get involved in the early stages may have very different motivations from those who get involved later, when the project or initiative offers very different things.
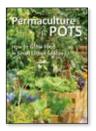
Shared norms and values are agreed in the early stages of a group's life: people feel included when they are able to take part in this, and later may be attracted when they find these norms fit their own. This is another reason that the motivations of initiators often differ from those of the people who get involved slightly later once the norms, values and activities of the group are established.
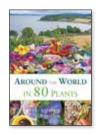
It might be useful to examine the basic needs people have (from Max-Neef, Maslow, etc.) and whether satisfaction of these needs motivates people: whether people think involvement will help satisfy these needs, whether it actually does, and the extent to which addressing these needs is taken into account in the design of group processes and activities.

The sense of inclusion and belonging is important for many people. They want to belong to a group, and co-create a 'family': an environment where they feel comfortable.
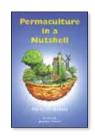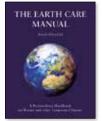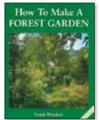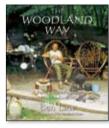
Books to empower your head, heart and hands

Resilience has become a familiar buzz word in mainstream politics, most commonly as an excuse for 'business as usual'. Both resilience science and practical experience of community-led action for social change action suggest an alternative view, in which resilience implies deep and far-reaching transformation of society.

This collection helps bring that vision into focus through a compelling blend of insights, ideas and action points from community activists, activist-scholars and leading resilience scientists. It includes direct accounts of practical efforts to build resilience at community level, theoretical reflections from a range of academic fields, and calls for collaboration among diverse efforts to create and defend community resilience worldwide.

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