

Walking Interconnections: performing conversations of sustainability

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Walking Interconnections recognises and responds to the fact that disabled people's voices have been largely absent from the sustainability debate. Representing one-fifth of the world's population, disabled people have unique contributions, often overlooked, to help build resilient societies and communities. Setting as its foundational tenet the fact that disability does not mean inability, *Walking Interconnections* uses *walking with* as a way to identify and make visible the everyday, embodied knowledges of disabled people – their habitual experiences of their environments and their persistent enactments of resilience within these.

Working with 19 co-researchers drawn from across two typically disconnected communities – disabled people and environmental activists – this AHRC Connected Communities funded research project *Walking Interconnections* exemplifies the aims of Connected Communities by not only connecting *with* communities but also using research to connect disparate communities *to* each other, facilitating knowledge exchange. A key component of the research was that each of our co-researchers invited another co-researcher to accompany them on a walk of their choice – exchanging experiences of the environment by walking together. Our focus on disabled people's participation in or exclusion from 'green' activism provides a clear connection with the Connected Communities core themes of community health and wellbeing, community creativity, community values and participation, sustainable community environments, places and spaces, and exclusion.

Insights from the research

The *Walking Interconnections* project harnessed arts-based and narrative inquiry methods to facilitate an exchange of knowledge and insights into different experiences in and of the world. These dialogues have allowed us to understand more about different forms of resilience in support of the transition to a sustainable society, including:

- The relationship between resilience and risk taking, deviation, problem solving, persistence and creativity;
- The absence of the disabled body within spaces typically coded as 'environmental' – e.g. heritage sites and 'natural' landscapes';
- The recognition that the dominant discourse of 'independence', particularly as this is attached to the field of disability policy and practices, belies the reality and necessity of *interdependence* – interdependence offering alternative and useful conceptions of 'sustainable living' (with the attendant practices of trust, negotiation, reciprocity, mutuality, and co-operation);
- That 'ability' is a dynamic definition for all human subjects (for example, some people feel more energetic in the morning, more vulnerable in the cold, etc.);
- That the uplift in cycling initiatives has ironically impacted negatively on disabled people's experiences of supposedly shared walking/cycling routes.

| Headlines | Underlying meaning |
|----------------------------|---|
| Access | Resilience: ability; risk taking; deviating/turning around; problem solving; persistence; creativity |
| Inclusion | Absence/disappearing of the disabled body; designed out; internalised pressures |
| In/dependence | Interdependence, relying on each other; taking and giving support; mutuality, co operation; trust; negotiation; reciprocity |
| Green/environmental | Wellbeing; caring; solidarity; mental health |
| Walking | Being in place differently, using senses differently, slowing down, focus; awareness |
| Information | Textured information: surface+gradient+incline; that people can actively use |
| Diversity | Not a homogenous group; temporal – shifting over a day for individuals; everyone's experience |

Having disseminated these insights at an event in Bristol in November 2013 (attended by over 40 people, drawn from a range of stakeholder organisations), we are keen to extend the impact of our research. Reflective, written responses to that local event indicate the potential for these findings to impact on organisations' engagement with disabled people – *people with knowledge* – as they plan their sustainability policies and practices:

"I'm taking away how important and valuable it is to listen and understand the different ways people experience a journey."

"Exclusion is especially about physical barriers and inclusion is often about relationships."

"The afternoon has reinforced the need to involve the widest range of people in influencing 'walkability' in Greater Bedminster."



Make or break moment on the sea wall.

Our decision was between retracing a long route or going off the beaten track on a shorter, but far more interesting and exciting route home. A short, steep hill led to the sea wall – a lot of effort for both partners to get up it and the sea wall invisible from its base. R hiked up the hill to make a visual description of terrain, gradient etc., trying to incorporate her new knowledge of trike capabilities and our combined resources (strength, stubbornness, etc.). The decision depended on information-sharing, consultation, negotiation, willingness to share risk and effort and opened up the highlight of the route that was passable only through this combined work.

"... in the end it was still touch and go but we decided just to kind of go for it. So we scrambled our way up there and wove our way along the edge and it was quite dodgy but it was do-able as well and actually it was really exciting because that was the moment that the landscape really opened up ... and without that sort of collaborative way of working we wouldn't have been able to make a judgment

about whether it was possible. If it had been just me, I couldn't have got up the hill so it was quite a significant day for me really."

Legacy and follow on activity

The workshop held on 25th November 2013 engaged stakeholders, who were able to take away insights from the research and translate them into their own areas of activity. Funding for the *Walking Interconnections* research project ceased at the end of January 2014, so its legacy will be largely through facilitating and catalysing others to take action informed by the findings. The audio-walk and publication, which we hope to achieve further funding to develop in time for the Connected Communities showcase to be held in Cardiff in June 2014, will provide the research team with innovative methods for engagement. In the meantime the PI, Sue Porter continues to take every opportunity to connect the research findings into current debates about resilience and sustainable cities.



Gap for walking through from car park but no dropped curb. We had to take a long detour.

"We had to go all the way back to the car park and all the way up the middle of the road but I was going on my walk ... we actually ended up with cars behind us, looking at us thinking why are you in our way, in such a stupid place ... no dropped curb, we were very frustrated."

Walking Interconnections as a catalyst

Walking Interconnections is already engaging in extensive follow-up networking activity, including with Bristol City's **Bristol Green Capital** project, Bristol having been awarded European Green City status for 2015. *Walking Interconnections* will be keying in to the Social Inclusion group and the Sustainable Futures group. *Walking Interconnections* and the learning from this project will feature in the **HighWaterLine** public arts project.

One of the original drivers for the research was the disproportionate impact of climate change related disasters upon disabled people (Abbott and Porter, 2013). As a result of the *Walking Interconnections* project a booklet will be produced by the Bristol Civil Protection Unit, developed with and aimed at disabled and older people titled '**Preparing for Emergencies in Bristol**' (a 10,000 booklet run, is to be published November 2014). Facilitated by Simon Creed, Bristol Civil Protection Unit, the PI is exploring the opportunity to present to **Emergency Planning Society** (3000 members,

UK wide) – the national group for Emergency planners, at a workshop and the national conference. The PI hopes also to be invited to write an article for *Resilience magazine*, published by the *Emergency Planning College*. There may also be potential to input to courses in the college.

Bristol and Glasgow are *Rockefeller-funded Resilient Cities* – the first two in the UK. The PI will be attending the 100 Resilient Cities Agenda Setting Workshop. Harnessing the energy attached to Resilient Cities, we aspire to also re-site and recite the research outcomes in Glasgow (the CI is based at the University of Glasgow).

Sue Porter, who led *Walking Interconnections*, has been invited to speak at the **2014 Schumacher Institute conference** on inclusion and sustainability, and it is our intention to replicate Walking Interconnections activities at the **2014 Festival of Nature** – this could entail an exhibition, guided / audio walks and the distribution of the *Walking Interconnections publication*.

Meetings have been held between members of the WECIL (West of England Centre for Integrated Living) peer support group, some of whom who participated in the *Walking Interconnections research*, and the *Walking for Health / Every Step Counts* initiatives. Being involved in the research project gave members confidence to engage with these initiatives.

As part of the local legacy of the project we will be collaborating with the Schumacher Institute, members of Bristol Older People's Forum and local Neighbourhood Partnerships to ensure that insights from the research support proposals, such as that to the Bristol City Active Neighbourhood Transport Grant, in relation to improvements to public spaces shared between cyclists and older / disabled users, and a detailed survey to test the 'walkability' of the walking routes identified, in order that they are inclusive of those with mobility problems. This will enable future decision makers to make good decisions about infrastructure on those routes. The project falls under the auspices of implementing *Bristol City Council's existing Walking Strategy* at a Neighbourhood level.

Networking continues. If you'd like to discuss the project and its findings contact sue.porter@bristol.ac.uk

Find out more about the research project on our website:
WalkingInterconnections.com