

# What is transformation?

## A review of emerging concepts

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### Research questions and objectives

The study of societal transformation in response to environmental change has become established, yet **little consensus exists regarding the conceptual basis of transformation**. This paper asked the following questions:

1. What **concepts** of transformation are emerging in the literature?
2. What are the **differences and similarities** among these concepts?
3. Are some concepts particularly associated with, or considered more suitable for specific **research approaches**?
4. What are the **implications** of conceptual diversity for the challenges of understanding and promoting transformative processes?

This paper aims to provide structure to the dialogue on transformation, and to reflect on the challenges of social research in this area.

### Research method

Articles published between 1990 and 2013 were searched through relevant keywords in the Web of Science. 138 publications were selected and their content was analysed to identify the academic works that informed the conceptualization of societal transformation adopted in those articles. The number of concepts identified was not pre-determined, and, instead, emerged from the selected literature.

Following Sztompka (1993), four cross-cutting general criteria to classify social change processes were adopted: (i) **system model** (e.g. elements, boundaries); (ii) **form and temporal range** (e.g. directional or non-directional); (iii) **seat of causality and social consciousness** (e.g. dominant cause or distributed human agency); and (iv) **outcome** (e.g. functional or structural change).

### Results: concepts of transformation

Transformation is often used simply as a **general metaphor** to convey the idea of a radical and fundamental change in a given system. In these cases, transformation is often not defined at all.

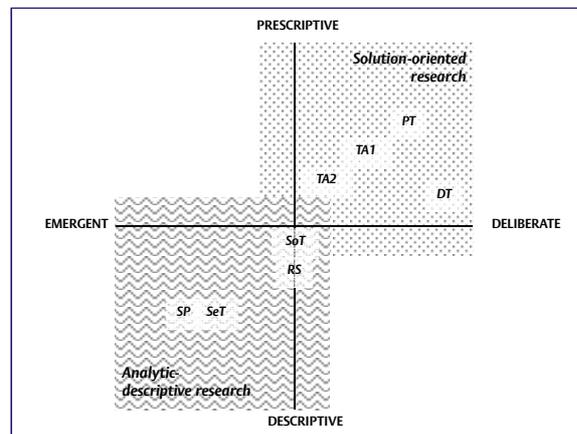
However, **eight emerging concepts of societal transformation** in response to global environmental change were identified (table below).

Concept	Key references	Scholarly tradition
Deliberate transformation (DT)	O'Brien (2012)	Various
Progressive transformation (PT)	Pelling (2011)	Human security
Regime shift (RS)	Walker et al. (2004) Folke et al. (2010)	Resilience
Societal transition (SoT)	Grin et al. (2010)	Transition theory
Social practice (SP)	Shove et al. (2012)	Social practices
Transformational adaptation (TA1)	Kates et al. (2012)	-
Transformational adaptation (TA2)	Park et al. (2012)	Resilience and transition theory
Socioecological transition (SeT)	Fischer Kowalski and Haberl (2007)	Social metabolism

### Results: analysis

The **eight emerging concepts of transformation differ in respect to system model** (e.g. social-ecological vs socio-technical systems), **social consciousness** (deliberate vs emergent), and **outcome** (prescriptive vs descriptive), while they share important similarities in respect to form (complexity) and temporal range (long term).

**Different concepts of transformation tend to inform different research approaches**. Problem-based research tends to adopt concepts of deliberate transformation with prescriptive outcome, while concepts of emergent transformation with no prescriptive outcome tend to inform descriptive-analytical research (figure below).



### Conclusions

This paper argues for a **rigorous, substantial use of transformation as an analytical concept**. Without a rigorous conceptualization of the term, scholars can hardly distinguish among its different usages and are therefore prevented from engaging in potentially fruitful discussions regarding how different interpretations relate to one another, how each interpretation may contribute to understanding observed phenomena, or what theoretical or methodological development may be needed to improve such understanding.

There is a **need to resist the temptation of attributing a transformative character to any instance of social change**. However, calling for rigorous concepts of transformation does not imply advocating for any specific concept, nor for limiting conceptual plurality. A **structured engagement with different traditions of thought** can highlight how concepts of transformation differ in practice, and their different blind spots and policy implications.

#### References

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