Is my vulnerability so different from your’s? A call for compassionate climate change research

Siri H Eriksen
Department of Public Health Science, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway

Abstract
Current conceptualizations of vulnerability have so far served to describe—and reproduce—social difference, setting people apart at local and global scales. Yet vulnerability is fundamental to the connectedness in social relations critical to understanding and acting on climate change. A more compassionate type of research is urgently required; that is, one that goes beyond the material and political dimensions to investigate the deeply personal. Drawing on politics of adaptation, emotional geographies, sustainability science and psychology literatures, the paper reconceptualizes vulnerability as co-suffering, linking lived experiences with a shared humanity.

Keywords
Vulnerability, climate change, compassion, climate resilient development, emotional geographies, personal-political

I Introduction
Twenty-five years ago, I went on fieldwork for my PhD a few weeks after two people I was very close to—my boyfriend and his brother—died in an accident. I felt intensely vulnerable. In my fieldwork I interviewed farmers in Kenya and Tanzania about their vulnerability to drought and floods. Yet I saw no connection between their vulnerability and mine. On a personal level, I pushed my own vulnerability to the background in order to carry out the fieldwork as planned. Intellectually, I also failed to connect the vulnerability I was studying to my own vulnerability. It is as though I had made the assumption that my vulnerability was something very different from the vulnerability of the people I was interviewing.

In retrospect, I find this assumption very problematic. In one sense, it was almost colonial in nature, resonating with a “we” and “they” mentality, implicitly setting myself above those I was interviewing. The assumption could be ascribed to the naïveté and inexperience of a PhD student. Yet it is not without resonance in the way that vulnerability is often conceived in the policy and research: the idea that poor people in developing countries are the most vulnerable to climate change is recounted again and again (Roy et al., 2018). An underlying assumption, which is also sometimes stated outright, is that “we” (the privileged in the global north) are not so
vulnerable. Indeed, it is difficult to dispute that poor people in developing countries are often vulnerable to climate change. However, these assumptions have deeper implications for how we perceive our own vulnerability and our place in a shared humanity. It is a perception of vulnerability that sets us apart as different.

On a personal level, denying vulnerability is a common coping strategy, a denial which is also understandable and well documented as a response to a seemingly unmanageable threat like climate change (Moser, 2007; Norgaard, 2011; Stoknes, 2014, 2015). However, denoting someone as more vulnerable than yourself, or differently vulnerable than yourself, also forms part of how skewed power relations are enacted in daily practice: It constitutes a subjecting process that positions people or groups as less capable, at the same time delegitimizing their knowledge and justifying particular interventions to “help the helpless” (Abbott and Porter, 2013; Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Eriksen et al., 2015). In setting my own vulnerability apart from that of my informants I was unconsciously engaging in both personal and political exercises, arguably reducing the quality both of my research and of the relations with the people I met. Was my vulnerability really qualitatively different from that of my informants, was my vulnerability more or less worthy?

I recount my personal experience above not to suggest that it is a good idea for students and researchers to go on fieldwork right after a personal tragedy has taken place. On the contrary, mine was not a particularly courageous nor wise way to deal with (or not deal with) grief. Rather than encouraging others to replicate my mistakes, I draw on this and other experiences to help illustrate how the personal and academic spheres are intrinsically connected in how we come to study and know the world around us.

In this paper, I argue that a more compassionate knowing of climate change is required in order both to understand climate change and to act on it. I describe how there is a fundamental dimension to vulnerability that the climate change literature has largely missed—that vulnerability is inherent in the connectedness in social relations critical to acting on climate change in an equitable and sustainable manner, both at local and global scales. A more compassionate type of research is urgently required; that is, vulnerability needs to be understood on a deeper personal and political level, going beyond being studied as an attribute that can be measured and described in a neutral fashion, addressed through technical fixes.

A compassionate approach to climate change research opens up new conceptual ways of understanding the intersection between the personal and the political, addressing an internal-external duality that has long riddled climate change vulnerability research. I draw on emotional geographies, sustainability science, as well as psychology perspectives in order to link personal and political dimensions of vulnerability, arguing that these two dimensions are co-constitutive. Within climate change research and policy, the vulnerability concept has served to explain—but also exacerbate—social difference and marginalization. Yet in everyday lived experiences and relations, vulnerability is also a positive force in deepening connectedness relations. To address this incongruity, we need to extend beyond the idea of potential harm and suffering as central to differential vulnerability, to explore co-suffering as part of the universality of vulnerability. This is not to say that we all experience the same vulnerability; instead, my argument builds on a recognition that vulnerability is universal to the human condition and unique to every single person (Joronen and Rose, 2021).

Compassion as a trans-situational value forms an entry point for a more comprehensive way of understanding the complexities of the lived experience of vulnerability, both triggering and guiding action. I propose vulnerability as a profoundly compassionate component of relations, actions and well-being. Such a proposition enables us to understand the complexity of the lived experience of vulnerability, and how vulnerability simultaneously acts to differentiate and to connect people. These insights have methodological implications. In a compassionate way of knowing, I cannot as a researcher pretend to be able to disconnect myself from those I am studying nor from my personal self the way I did during my PhD research and often since. Instead, we need to extend beyond a material understanding of vulnerability in
order to discern the significance for global development of an individual’s, group’s or society’s vulnerability. An important implication is that we need to pay attention to how the ordinary person is seen and recognized—as different from measured—within our conceptual and analytical frameworks, such as those that shape our understanding of vulnerability, well-being, and climate resilient development. Ultimately, compassion and a shared humanity are what link climate change with our lived realities.

II Climate change knowledge as differencing and disconnecting people

One of the big challenges of our time is connecting the knowledge that climate change is an urgent problem with action on the ground (Wilson and Orlove, 2021). The pervasive and socially unjust effects of climate change on society are becoming increasingly clear (IPCC, 2022; Roy et al., 2018). Yet scholars, policy makers and public often fail to connect with what it means for our daily lives and how to act to address the problem within our lived realities, contributing to disengagement (Myers et al., 2012; Stoknes, 2014). Leichenko and O’Brien (2019) point out that the tendency within dominant problem understandings to reduce people to their individual ecological footprints and to being recipients of policy decisions disempowers ordinary people and underestimates their collective ability as political actors to transform systems.

Overcoming this challenge may require sourcing forms of knowing rooted in the lived experiences of climate change. The choices required to embrace uncertainty, reconcile divergent interests and shape future developments are profoundly ethical rather than merely technical, requiring multiple knowledges and ways of knowing (Goldman et al., 2016; Goldman et al., 2018; Hulme, 2018). In the face of climate change, the onus is on us to not only act urgently, but to act differently. Transforming current unsustainable development involves fundamental changes in form, structure, and/or meaning-making, including practices, systems, worldviews and knowledges (O’Brien, 2018). The term “climate resilient development” has been coined to foreground a different type of development from current trajectories, one emerging from societal choices based on social justice, vulnerability reduction, and human and ecological well-being, while ensuring a sharp drop in GHG emissions (Roy et al., 2018; Schipper et al., 2020). Such interpretations explicitly situate climate action within societal development processes, the ethical considerations that guide such normative visions of development, and the socio-political processes through which the ethical dimensions defining what constitutes desirable development are negotiated and contested. Therefore, we need to engage with the kinds of knowledges that can serve as a compass for ethically founded action.

It is becoming increasingly clear that conventional climate science is insufficient to serve as such a compass. An expanding politics of climate change literature has investigated the socio-political processes through which climate change impacts and measures are negotiated (Barnett, 2020; Tanner and Allouche, 2011). This work points out that the persistent striving within climate research for an as complete as possible knowledge and neatly planned solutions, based on the assumption that filling the knowledge deficit would automatically spur action that was good for all, has contributed to an impasse and inaction (Nightingale et al., 2019; Ryan, 2016; Schipper et al., 2020). A limited set of expert knowledges come to dominate in problem understandings and related decision-making, legitimizing particular actions, actors, and interests (Mikulewicz, 2020; O’Brien, 2018; Pelling, 2011). Indeed, dominant techno-managerial understandings of climate change are intrinsic to the climate change problem itself and why we fail to make required system shifts to limit warming and reduce inequities (Nightingale et al., 2019; Rogelj et al., 2018), or even end up acting in ways that make matters worse (Atteridge and Remling, 2018; Markkanen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019).

As a result, scholars call for shifts in ontologies in order to understand how to engender and direct action when many facets of climate change and our relationship to it are fundamentally unknowable (Hulme, 2018; Schipper et al., 2020). This paper is based on the premise that the ethical judgments
required in acting on climate change demand deep engagement with the ways in which climate change influences people’s lives, that is, the lived experiences of climate change, encompassing the choices, knowledge and meanings attached to everyday experiences by individuals in their relation to their surroundings (Abbott and Wilson, 2015).

First, lived experience forms of knowing, including personal and affective, are required to overcome dominant understandings of climate change that separate society from nature and that are at the root of the climate change problem (Pelling, 2011; Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011). In order to address climate change, we need to confront the way we understand our place in nature, including relations of domination with other humans and non-human species (Nightingale et al., 2019). Sustainability science sees a reconnecting of people with nature as one of the focus areas of transformative interventions (Ives et al., 2017). Critical adaptation scholars point out that rather than a lack of connections, a carbon-intensive and inequitable development model is grounded in utilitarian environment-society relations, with vulnerability, dispossession, disenfranchisement, labor exploitation, biodiversity loss, and climate change as unavoidable externalities (Leichenko and O’Brien, 2019; Pelling, 2011). This development model is supported by knowledges that are preoccupied with how society can manage nature to most efficiently maximize utility. Such dualistic framings are rejected by socio-nature approaches that describe nature—and climate change—as inescapably social because nature is defined, delimited, and even physically reconstituted by human actions serving particular social interests (Castree, 2001; Nightingale, 2015). Ingold (2005: 503) explains that “all creatures, human and non-human, are fellow passengers in the one world in which they all live, and through their activities continually create the conditions for each other’s existence.”

When seen in this way, people’s lived experiences of climate change are inseparable from the relations with other humans, non-human species and the socio-physical environment that they continuously (re)produce. Emotional geographies describe experience, nature, and emotions as co-constitutive; that is, we are connected with our surroundings through events and encounters that are emotional and affective—not merely cognitive—experiences (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011). Simply put “People experience life through emotions and within environments,” making sense of their surroundings through emotions and constructing reality through experiences (Ryan, 2016: 6).

Second, wisdom rather than knowledge alone is required to guide ethical action. This is seen to represent a deeper form of knowing than scientific knowledge, drawing attention to the way in which knowledge is nested in judgment of proper ways to act, as gained on past experiences (Fazey et al., 2020). The deeper and experiential forms of knowing on which ethical judgments rest may include local or indigenous knowledge; tacit knowledge; embodied knowledge and reflective self-knowledge (Hulme, 2018; Nightingale et al., 2022); as well as sensory ways of knowing; that is, art, music, and other ways that we sense—and make sense of—our social and ecological surroundings (Heinrichs, 2019a, 2019b). There is also increasing recognition that values and ethics (such as freedom, harmony, safety, and unity) shape cognitive and psychological processes of meaning-making, directing engagement and action around climate change (Fazey et al. 2018; Hochacha, 2019; Wolf and Moser, 2011). These insights direct attention to ways of knowing the multi-dimensional ways in which climate change is experienced in daily lives, including the relational, ethical, existential, and emotional. The often intangible, personal, or “inner” dimensions of climate change are fundamental to how we act, individually and collectively (Bond and Barth, 2020; Tschakert, 2022; Tschakert et al., 2019; Verlie, 2019).

The vulnerability concept—central to the climate change field—should in principle represent an important entry point for mobilizing lived experience forms of knowing. Vulnerability research has often attempted to tell the story of ordinary people whose voices are otherwise seldom heard in public debates and climate change policy making. A vast literature exists that explores vulnerability in terms of livelihood practices, processes of social differentiation and socio-environmental causes of vulnerability (Carr, 2019; Eakin, 2006; Leichenko and O’Brien,
2008; McDowell and Hess, 2012; Reid and Vogel, 2006; Sen, 1981; Thompson-Hall et al., 2016; Wisner et al., 2004; Ziervogel et al., 2006). Such research has provided ethnographic descriptions of how people adjust their livelihoods in the face of climatic events, seasonality and longer-term change, such as through engaging in multiple crops and livelihoods, relying on remittances from relatives, drawing on social networks, as well as various forms of illicit coping strategies (Carr, 2008; Mosberg and Eriksen, 2015; Thomas et al., 2007; Tschakert, 2007). Yet research has tended to describe local vulnerability rather than deeply engage with people’s experiences and inadvertently acted to disempower and disconnect people.

Accounts often allude to the personal dimensions of the lived experience of climate change. For example, when investigating two villages in Mozambique during a prolonged period of drought (2001–2003) that followed the devastating 2000 floods, we found that the experiences of the relatively well-off and poorer people were very different, though connected through labor and market relations. While the relatively better off with access to irrigated land and lorry transport could capitalize on cheap labor and high prices for tomatoes due to the drought, the only livelihood option for many women consisted of carefully cultivating small quantities of pumpkin leaves in the river bed—the plants would not yield the pumpkin itself due to the river sand lacking nutrients. The women would then spend a whole day walking to the market to sell leaves for a meager income (Eriksen and Silva, 2009). Yet, this and other vulnerability research has delved into the more personal aspects of lived experiences, such as feelings of dejection, creativity or perseverance, only up to a point, and often as an afterthought framed by the largely material livelihood or risk dimensions of vulnerability. Early conceptualizations of social vulnerability did place people at the center of analysis, including aspects relevant to the personal, such as propensity for harm and suffering. However, Chambers (1989, 1) foundational definition of vulnerability as “the exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty in coping with them” nevertheless reflects a duality between the internal and the external. This duality has persisted in climate change discourse, defining vulnerability as “the propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected,” comprising “sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt” (IPCC, 2022). Despite conceptual and empirical advances placing people and relations at the center of analysis (Nightingale, 2017; Pelling, 2011; Taylor, 2014; Tschakert et al., 2016), the usage of the vulnerability concept continues to struggle with slippage into nature-society and internal-external dichotomies, with the internal signifying material rather than personal dimensions of an individual or group and the external pertaining to socio-environmental stressors to which they are exposed.

Hence, the vulnerability and adaptation discourse remains criticized for failing to explicitly probe the deeper personal-political dimensions, often rendering depoliticized and material analyses and policy recommendations (Mikulewicz, 2019; Nightingale et al., 2019; Scoville-Simonds et al., 2020). What vulnerability really means in people’s everyday lived personal, emotional, existential, and spiritual experiences is largely ignored in mainstream adaptation research (Scoville-Simonds, 2018; Tschakert et al., 2016). Climate change vulnerability literature has stopped short of engaging explicitly with the “internal” or personal aspects of vulnerability, and how the internal and external are linked. This failure leads to a framing of humans as autonomous atoms of self-sufficient beings that need to improve one selves in order to become more resilient in the face of increasingly vulnerable conditions (Joronen and Rose, 2021).

Furthermore, the persistent slippage into dualistic framings and a lack of articulation of the personal contribute to a politics of knowledge that acts to socially differentiate and set people apart. In the striving to identify how “vulnerable communities” can build adaptive capacity, the drivers of vulnerability, including socio-political processes of marginalization, often drop out of view (Nygren and Wayessa, 2018). The identification of groups as vulnerable, while legitimizing their receiving aid, frames adaptation as rectifying deficiencies among vulnerable people (Barnett, 2020) This delegitimizes
their knowledge, strategies and agency while legitimizing the authority of outsiders (an expert-policymaker elite) to perform adaptation on them (Mikulewicz, 2020). Hence, the daily practice of vulnerability assessments and adaptation interventions often reproduce the inequitable power relations and vulnerability patterns that the interventions actually aim to address (Eriksen et al., 2021a; Scoville-Simonds et al., 2020).

An emphasis on how the most vulnerable are poor people dependent on climate-sensitive natural resources inadvertently also serves to shore up a feeling of the relative invulnerability of privileged wealthier people. In this interpretation, vulnerability does not have to do with us being human, but about physical risk, damage, food insecurity, and poverty. Invulnerability becomes part of an imagined privilege. This tendency can lead to extreme outcomes of social differencing and “othering”: Thomas and Warner (2019) identify a “weaponizing vulnerability” process whereby the influential elite portray those vulnerable to climate events as a security concern rather than recognizing their vulnerability experience. This concern justifies the focusing of formal adaptation measures on bolstering the rich against the “vulnerable.” A material subjecting of people as more or less vulnerable hence contributes to a de-humanizing vulnerability discourse in addition to constituting a social ordering (Mikulewicz, 2019). This tendency is completely at odds with humanist values such as equity and dignity that underpin sustainability. It is equally at odds with the insight that vulnerability is “a profound existential condition definitive for all living beings” (Joronen and Rose, 2021: 1403), where vulnerability is an essential part of being human (Butler, 2004). By not reflecting on my own vulnerability during my PhD, seeing it as different from that of my informants, I was perpetuating an epistemological injustice predominant in current research, underrepresenting intangible values that may be essential to well-being among marginalized people (Tschakert et al., 2019). I was also setting myself apart from my informants, defining the vulnerability of a European urban dweller as a different form of vulnerability from that of African small-scale farmers. Vulnerability, then, has often become a differencing term that sets people apart at global and local scales.

III Vulnerability as a positive force in deepening connectedness?

Lifting my gaze from the familiar territory of vulnerability research, it has struck me as odd that the term vulnerability has assumed a predominantly negative differencing and disconnecting role. After all, vulnerability is a quality that all people have in common, regardless of gender, ethnicity, livelihood, socio-economic status, geographical location or any other socially differentiating dimensions. It hence represents a shared experience that binds us together.

There is a striking contrast between the setting apart of people within climate change vulnerability discourse, and the common everyday meaning of vulnerability as ubiquitous in our lives, in our emotions and in relations with others. Attachment theory literature as well as a host of psychology self-help websites expound how vulnerability is inherent to relations, a productive force in the forging of secure relations and deep connectedness with others. It is argued that in order to transcend fears and build relations, it is important to embrace and understand the vulnerability that leads to counter-productive behavior, involving a “being with” rather than “feeling” vulnerability (Ingram, 2003). In this interpretation, invulnerability is not an imagined privilege towards which we strive, it is simply unattainable. In other words, in our lived experiences, vulnerability often acts to connect people.

Emotional geographies literature posits that the internal and external cannot be meaningfully separated. Importantly, actions and relations are always both personal and political in the sense of having to do with power relationships (Hanisch, 2006). The personal concerns the often silenced experiences that take place through everyday practices, such as the effect of cuts in public spending on gendered public and domestic care work (Hall, 2020). Askins (2015) describes the quiet politics of encounter that take place in relations of care, exemplifying how the everyday actions through which immigrants befriend local populations constitute hidden power dynamics.
Small compassionate acts of care form affective bonds; at the same time, they also constitute quiet political acts and larger movements of change. Such acts parallel the everyday actions through which people negotiate vulnerability, such as drought coping mechanisms or adaptation interventions. Hence, the personal everyday experiences are intrinsically linked to broader political processes and social differentiation.

This paper builds on these insights, engaging explicitly with the personal in order to overcome internal-external and nature-society dualist framings. I draw on the concept of compassion to insert the personal into vulnerability understandings, and reframe vulnerability as intrinsic to connectedness and a shared humanity. Building on Joronen and Rose (2021), I recognize that vulnerability is existential and universal to the human condition rather than only relationally produced. Joronen and Rose argue that existential vulnerability is the origin of power and at the same time the limit to endeavors to resolve vulnerability. I depart from this view to explore a more dialectical interpretation of the universal condition of vulnerability, where vulnerability is not only centered on resolving inherent vulnerability, but simultaneously also constituting a positive force in producing social relations and well-being. I therefore align with emotional geographies that foreground human subjects as inter-dependent on human and more-than-human others, connections and actions arising from encounters that are fundamentally emotional and affective (Ryan, 2016) and “guided by the subject’s ethical sensitivity, responsivity and responsibility to earth others” (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011: 45).

A shift in vulnerability discourse is required to extend from well-established understandings of the ways in which socio-political relations produce differential vulnerability (i.e., leading to a “feeling vulnerability”), to include an understanding of vulnerability as producing connectedness to others (i.e., a “being with” vulnerability). I term this latter form of knowing “compassionate vulnerability.” Central to the exploration of compassionate vulnerability is the way that the ability to identify with other people’s vulnerability through one’s own experience of vulnerability binds us together. In other words, I extend from the idea of suffering as a fundamental part of vulnerability, to a recognition of co-suffering as fundamental in relations.

These “inner” or personal dimensions are not separate from but co-constitutive of the “external” political dimensions of vulnerability relations. As an illustration, the political explains how, when I discounted my own vulnerability during my PhD fieldwork, I was implicitly subjecting my informants as more vulnerable and less capable than myself and reinforcing an inequitable power relation between us. However, it is only the role that a shared sense of suffering plays in forging interpersonal connections that can help explain what I have seen as most problematic with discounting my own vulnerability: my resulting failure to identify with and understand my informants’ deeper experiences of vulnerability.

IV Outlining a compassionate knowing of vulnerability

Compassion can be explained as the quality of identifying with others’ experience of suffering. The Oxford English Dictionary defines compassion as suffering together with another, and a sense of fellow-feeling, derived from the Latin meaning of “co-suffering.” Merriam-Webster defines compassion as “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” Within the psychology literature, the term is generally agreed to include both cognitive, affective and behavioral components (Gilbert, 2009), such as the recognition of suffering and emotional resonance to that suffering (Strauss et al., 2016). The motivation to act to alleviate suffering is grounded in our ability to be emotionally touched and identify with others’ suffering (Strauss et al., 2016). Compassion hence describes the depth of how we connect emotionally to understand others and motivate action.

While Chambers’ (1989) foundational definition of vulnerability prompts an intellectual observation of the propensity for harm and suffering, a compassionate knowing of vulnerability emerges from our emotional consciousness of other people’s suffering as mirrored in our own experience of suffering. Hence, compassionate vulnerability is never just an
observation of other people’s experience as disconnected from one’s own experience. Strauss et al. (2016) argue that being able to tolerate uncomfortable feelings forms an essential element of compassion since seeing suffering can spark feelings of distaste, frustration or anger from which we try to protect ourselves through indifference or inaction. Emotional geographies emphasize that intimate connectedness and receptiveness to others and in encountering otherness often involves emotionally challenging engagement (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011). Radical transformation and the new possibilities for ethical and political action emerge from affective relations and moments of connectedness that are simultaneously enchanting and uncomfortable (Ryan, 2016). For example, one can be intimately connected with human and more-than-human others through feeling sorrow, and this same sorrow “makes it possible for hope to arise from within the recognition and daily lived experiences of environmental degradation, rather than in its opposition or avoidance” (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011: 52–53). Valdivia and Lu (2021) similarly expound that engaging with moments of discomfort, or “uncomfortable witnessing,” is central to connecting across difference in order to see “the diversity in conception, form and practice in what constitutes humanity and care” (411). Tolerating the discomfort of existential vulnerability, then, is necessary to understanding how the experience of vulnerability is both shared and unique to every person, and to discerning how people live with climate change vulnerability in ways that include multifaceted encounters, actions and agency.

My boyfriend and his brother fell several hundred meters to their deaths while climbing a mountain in July 1997. It took me many years to understand how the shock, grief and confusion that I felt could actually be a strength in relating to others, and that my vulnerability—though it took courage to embrace it rather than be ashamed of it—also constituted a necessary ingredient of compassionate interconnectedness with others. So, while losing two people I was close to made me feel intensely vulnerable, the shared grief which constitutes part of my vulnerability can also be a source of emotional understanding of other people’s lived experience of climate change.

Compassionate vulnerability provides a counterweight to the differencing, othering and weaponizing tendencies described in the previous section, where the vulnerable “others” constitute an incapable or dangerous group from which the privileged must protect themselves. Compassion introduces the idea of universality of suffering as the backbone of a shared humanity and how we relate to the “anonymous others” (Butler, 2004; Massey, 2004). Feldman and Kuyken (2011) explain compassion as “an orientation of mind that recognizes pain and the universality of pain in human experience and the capacity to meet that pain with kindness, empathy, equanimity and patience” (p. 144). Compassion is felt not only for our kin, but also for others we do not know and might never meet. Butler (2004) expounds how we are all in dependency relations to anonymous others—exemplified by how terrorists inflicted death and injury on thousands of ordinary civilians in the US on September 11, 2001. The attacks exposed a vulnerability in “privileged first world people,” showing how no one, not even people in wealthier and relatively safer societies, is immune from the actions of others. Compassion hence involves a realization of a common humanity and “perceiving one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating” (Neff, 2003: 85).

How we recognize our vulnerability is critical not just at a level of interpersonal relations but also to how society acts collectively in the face of shocks and changes. Wisdom, according to Buddhist traditions, is to “understand that suffering is part of what it is to be human” (Strauss et al., 2016: 17) and to be understanding rather than indifferent or critical towards those who suffer. Hence, a recognition of a shared humanity is related to being able to meet vulnerability with wisdom and kindness. Yet, vulnerability does not necessarily lead to acceptance and kindness that form part of compassionate action. For example, “feeling vulnerable” type interpretations such as striving for invulnerability as an imagined privilege, instead of “being with” representations of societal vulnerability, dislocate actions from a compassionate knowing and a sense of a shared humanity. Such a dislocation opens up space for negative political actions to avoid the object of fear,
such as forms of domination, protectionism and separateness (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011). The US response to terrorist attacks to illustrate such a dislocation. Butler (2004) argues that the US—the government administration as well as many ordinary people—reacted to vulnerability in manner so as to maintain supremacy and cut off international collaboration and “the anonymous others.” Vulnerability and grief could instead have precipitated a different politics based on an understanding of the US place in the world, inevitable interdependence, and how actions by the US had caused injury among others—a consciousness of a shared vulnerability.

A contrasting response is illustrated by the forms of collective action that can be spurred by knowing the lived experience of disability in the daily practice of climate change vulnerability (Eriksen et al., 2021b; Fafchamps and Kebede, 2012). Indeed, experiencing how societal structures act to “disable” people by privileging certain types of bodies and minds over others and defining what is normal or “sufficient” (Abbott and Porter, 2013) helps understand how climate change and inequitable socio-political processes together similarly raise the bar for what constitutes being “resilient enough,” acting to “vulnerablise” people. Redefining disabled people from vulnerable “victims of climate change” to “valued experts of sustainability” helps source their intimate resilience knowledge gained from overcoming unexpected barriers and problems in the everyday, as well as their embodied encounters with exclusion (Abbott and Porter, 2013). Görgens and Ziervogel (2018) suggest that disabled people are ideal mediators of conversations about vulnerability because their knowing increases inclusiveness for all groups. Their insights of social interdependence also helps to counter current tendencies in vulnerability discourses towards self-sufficiency, “fixing the vulnerable” and othering, to instead open up space for interconnectedness, a questioning of social ordering, and transformative action. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has shown how social and global interconnectedness are intrinsic to our vulnerability and well-being in the face of shocks, these lessons suggesting that solidarity is a necessary ingredient in any efforts to foster socially just forms of climate resilient development (Schipper et al., 2020).

A compassionate knowing of vulnerability allows us to unpack several aspects of the complex linkages between the lived experience of climate change and how we act in the face of it. First, vulnerability constitutes a personal-political quality that simultaneously acts to connect and differentiate. The idea of co-suffering and a shared experience of vulnerability does not mean that we experience the same vulnerability in a material nor emotional sense; on the contrary, the lived experience of vulnerability is different for every single person. Rather, it is the recognition and emotional knowing that we are all vulnerable that connects us in a shared humanity. This connectedness, then, is not in contradiction with, but co-exists with, the socio-political relations that serve to marginalize and produce differentiated vulnerability. The two are inextricably linked, the political and personal being co-constitutive in vulnerability relations. It is only by rejecting the internal-external duality that has hampered vulnerability understandings so far that we can productively hold and explore the tension between connectedness and differentiation that forms part of the complexity of the lived experience of vulnerability.

Second, compassionate vulnerability represents a value guiding how we form relations and act in relation to others. Compassion can be considered a transcendental value, that is, a guiding principle grounded in personal ethics transcending situations or contexts (Stålhammar and Thorén, 2019). This interpretation extends beyond sustainability science explorations of how nature has a relational value to people—such as the way that a sense of belonging, kinship and care for other living things contribute to well-being (Stålhammar and Thorén, 2019; West et al., 2018)—that can motivate stewardship actions and relational ways of being, knowing, and acting (Walsh et al., 2021; West et al., 2018). Compassion as a transcendental value also contrasts with empathy as a means of building relations with nature and others in order to motivate sustainable interactions with the biosphere that overcome social exclusion and generate compassionate responses in relation to the human and non-human (Brown et al., 2019). While empathy is the capacity to understand other’s emotions, compassion signifies identifying with, intimately connecting and being with the
other’s experience through one’s own emotions and experiences, compelling one to act.

Third, compassionate vulnerability and well-being are two sides of the same coin. Compassion as a transcendent value and the actions guided by it to alleviate others’ vulnerability are intrinsic to one’s own and collective well-being and resilience (Gilbert, 2009; Ives et al., 2017). Connectedness through maintenance of affective bonds, proximity to others and social cohesion is crucial in humans’ basic emotional needs and well-being (Capaldi et al., 2014; Delhey and Dragolov, 2016; Frumkin et al., 2017; Ingram, 2003). Roelvink and Zolkos (2011) explain that connectedness through receptiveness and fidelity to, rather than cognitive knowledge of, encounters with human and more-than-human others is how we come into being as humans. How we come into being through acting on vulnerability constitutes an important inner world aspect of well-being, such as through enacting creativity, personal growth, purpose, self-actualization, meaning, inner balance, and harmony (Carlquist et al., 2017; Gasper, 2010; Wilcock and Hocking, 2015).

V Practicing compassionate climate change research

The features of a compassionate vulnerability knowing outlined above have several implications for research practice. First, a compassionate vulnerability approach needs to engage explicitly with emotions, conceptually and methodologically, in order to understand the personal-political. Emotional geographies emphasize emotions as relational “generated by and expressive of the wider social relations” (Bondi, 2005: p 436), but also “deeply socio-natural products of relational, embodied interactions with both human and non-human others” (Nightingale, 2013: 2369). In particular, emotions provide important information not just about shared suffering but also uneven socio-political relations. Sultana (2011) argues that studying emotions and how they are experienced and negotiated in resource management practices and survival strategies helps understand the messiness of everyday politics and power struggles. For example, gender–water relations inflict diverse and nuanced senses of suffering and pain among people, including both struggle and tension between people, with enduring humiliation, anxiety and shame forming part the emotional labor of negotiating access to safe water for marginalized women. This example alludes to the deep personal dimensions of the political, and how it is impossible to fully understand one without engaging with the other. Examining the personal helps articulate what compassion as a trans-situational value means in practice. An emotional knowing of suffering can help enrich our understanding of what types of suffering, actions and social injustices are acceptable (or not) and guide ethical action.

To illustrate, a moment that made great impression on me took place when I was doing postdoctoral research in Mozambique in 2006. I was interviewing people in a flood-stricken area in Buzi, close to Beira, which had been the target of resettlement and reconstruction after the floods. One man explained how his wife and their infant whom she was carrying on her back had been killed by a crocodile while she was fetching water in the river. The depth of such a personal loss was difficult to fathom. He also recounted how since houses in that village had “only” been damaged and not been entirely swept away by the floods, they were not entitled to receiving building materials to help recover after the floods. Since they were relatively close to the river and hence considered to have access to water (crocodile-infested or not), the village also did not receive support to construct a water pump. Instead, post-flood assistance for people in the village had consisted of being hired to help rebuild houses in other villages where people had been entitled to building materials. The feeling of loss and the lack of recognition by post-flood assistance organizations, was profound and heart-breaking. His broken leg and the crocodile attack had a deeper significance than physical pain and loss of two family members—it was also about personal bereavement, capacity to sustain his remaining children, and his relationship to the larger village and the state, where he was not found worthy of the same support as others. As my research assistant remarked at the time: “Everything is far, only the crocodiles are near.” The vulnerability that the informant experienced was clearly so much
more than the material. This example shows how it was only by engaging with the emotional suffering of losing his wife and infant and simultaneously being ignored by those providing aid, could I understand the political dimensions of relational vulnerability, that is, “the ways in which marginalized peoples are adversely incorporated into political, social and economic relationships that produce their vulnerability while simultaneously creating relative security for others” (Taylor, 2013: 318).

A second important aspect in developing compassionate climate change research, is the need to approach data collection as situating the researcher and the researched as humans with a shared but differentiated vulnerability in order to gain a deeper understanding of how existential vulnerability and social differentiation interact in the lived experience of vulnerability. This requires, for example, locating oneself with the research participants, producing “knowledge with and for rather than about those at risk” (Barnett, 2020: 1179) to reflect on how difference and connectedness occur simultaneously in an interview situation (Sultana, 2021). Data collection then means sourcing moments of shared existential vulnerability and care as connectedness, encounters that humanize both the researcher and researched. It also requires a recognition of how research situations shift subjectivities, such as by positioning the researched as valuable experts rather than as a vulnerable group. Research that explicitly commits to creating conditions for social change and centering marginalized voices (Cahill, 2007) highlights the importance of forging ethical relations that ensure that research situations counteract rather than reproduce the inequities and hierarchies that the research is supposed to address (Sultana, 2007, 2021).

Third, compassionate vulnerability research relies on forms of data collection that allow personal encounters (Ryan, 2016) and situations of fidelity to the other’s vulnerability (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011), which means going beyond cognitive observation of vulnerability to sourcing one’s own existential vulnerability, for example in an interview situation. Here emotions are seen not as individualized mental states or objects, but as relationally produced between people and places through everyday encounters and practices (Askins and Swanson, 2019; Sultana, 2011). In emotional forms of knowing, emotions are studied “not as an object of study but as a relational connective medium in which research, researchers and research subjects are necessarily immersed” (Bondi, 2005: 433). Emotions are the vehicle through which compassion is sensed, communicated and enacted. Hence, a compassionate approach requires us to approach data collection as an inter-relational experience, seeing and recognizing people’s lived experiences of vulnerability, “grappling with the emotions swirling through intersecting lives and geographies” (Askins and Swanson, 2019: 2), rather than measuring vulnerability. Askins and Swanson (2019) propose that personal stories (pen portraits), rather than quantified methods counting deaths or material losses after a disaster, can “humanize” people in research activities. Furthermore, forging moments of connectedness, fidelity and receptiveness of the other’s emotions draws attention to listening as a research methodology. This may require listening to difficult stories of adversity and suffering (Ratnam, 2019). Indeed, research as personal encounters requires engaging in uncomfortable witnessing (Valdivia and Lu, 2021), being able to simultaneously hold enchantment and discomfort that together form part of connecting with others (Ryan, 2016).

The point here is not to demand that drought or flood victims should embrace their vulnerability in the sense of accepting it as fate nor that the researcher engages in a quasi-therapeutic relation with the informant; indeed, this would be condescending rather than compassionate. Instead, the imperative is that a compassionate vulnerability researcher engages deeply with the informant’s lived experience of vulnerability. A compassionate knowing involves the ability to connect with and identify with the feelings of the other, meaning that how the researcher experiences an interaction with someone is equally important as the “cognitive” knowledge derived from the encounter. Without identifying with others’ experiences of vulnerability, it is impossible to understand how fear, shame, and pain form part of the lived experience of climate change. This involves sourcing of emotions as a form of knowing in the relation with the informant. Here the researcher
cannot be a detached observer of the others’ emotions (Bondi, 2005). The relation between the researcher and informant becomes a source of data, with both the researcher and the informant above all being humans in a shared humanity and the vulnerability experiences of the researcher her/himself central to capturing and interpreting information. This requires a form of “reflexive self-monitoring” of “the emotions that flow between and among people and places, including researchers as well as those on whom their research focuses” (Bondi, 2005: 436).

Fourth, reflexivity is important not only regarding the social relations and power dynamics between the researcher and researched, but also the emotional competence involved in conducting such research (Hall, 2020). A compassionate vulnerability approach places particular demands on reflexivity and ethical considerations because it often involves seeking out the intangible, emotional aspects of vulnerability (Manning and Clayton, 2018). Intangible suffering and silent knowledges, may only be brought out through the relational, communicated with emotion rather than being objectively observed (Bondi, 2014; Gonzalez-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020). Examining the emotions that form part of suffering (or coping and recovery) allows us to explore the lived experience of vulnerability, similar to what Sultana (2011) calls the experience of hardship, including agency, values, relationships, as well as under-represented needs and perspectives. Attention is therefore required to how research situations as an emotional form of communication may create new forms of meaning making and affect the researched positively or negatively.

Finally, it is important to recognize that sourcing compassionate encounters is emotionally demanding. It often requires holding contradictions and discomfort, such as listening to traumatic experiences shared in interviews while identifying with the researched. Furthermore, Sultana (2021) describes how navigating intersectional difference, bonding, and perhaps disconnecting and being othered in research situations constitutes hard emotional labor. For a researcher to operate safely within this emotional landscape, methods such as debriefing with a trusted colleague or professional after data collection or other forms of attention to the emotional labor of vulnerability research are required. All too often, we pretend to be unaffected by sensing others’ and our own vulnerability and push the emotional impressions which are hard to bear to the background. Instead, we must consciously explore our capacity to engage compassionately and safely in research relations. This may require us to draw on the experience from very different fields than climate change, such as social work, in order to engage in a conversation with very vulnerable groups, such as children who have been subject to abuse (Gamst, 2017). Compassionate research may challenge us to move far outside our comfort zone necessitating more comprehensive methodological training than is common at most universities, regarding how to conduct research with people in vulnerable situations in a safe and ethical way.

VI Conclusion

This article is motivated by the need for deeper thinking about why seeing someone else’s vulnerability as something different than my own is so problematic. It addresses calls to thicken climate change knowledge by exploring “ideas that will never admit a technical solution: ideas like justice, equity, goodness, humility, and democracy” (Hulme, 2018: 334). Outlining a compassionate knowing of vulnerability, this article links the personal with the political in order to unlock persistent nature-society and internal-external dualistic framings within climate change discourse. A compassionate knowing of vulnerability, including investigating the emotional aspects of lived experiences, is central to understanding how we act in the face of climate change.

In this paper, I have mobilized psychology and climate change vulnerability literature in order to address the challenges pointed out by emotional geographies and sustainability science, that is, the need to deepen understanding of existential vulnerability, interconnectedness and relations of affect. Related fields of study, such as environmental conflicts, have studied emotions in order to understand how the personal and political are co-constitutive (Gonzalez-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020). Although there is emerging literature on the effects of climatic events and change on mental health (Cunsolo and
Ellis, 2018; Manning and Clayton, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018), the climate change research and policy community has so far been reluctant to wholeheartedly engage with the personal dimensions of climate change as revealing the personal-political, and the how of supporting normative shifts in development remains elusive (Vogel and O’Brien, 2022). This paper begins to address these shortcomings by reframing vulnerability as co-suffering. A key insight from this exploration is that vulnerability is simultaneously existential, universal to the human condition, socially differentiated and unique to every individual. The contradictions and tensions between these help explain the diversity of actions that are generated by vulnerability—at times compassionate and connecting, at other times differentiating and setting populations apart. Insisting on understanding vulnerability as a universal condition and part of what it is to be human erases a tendency in literature to treat vulnerability as an abnormal condition brought about by climate change. Such compassionate climate change research rejects the identification of vulnerable groups, but instead identifies relations and dependencies that make us prone to injury, weaken connectedness, and promote unilateral and violent actions. Vulnerability cannot be removed through appropriate policy interventions; instead we need to engage with the deeper qualities of vulnerability relations that can only be understood through investigating—and emotionally investing in—the lived experience of vulnerability.

During my final day of PhD fieldwork in Kenya, an elderly man I was interviewing commented that I looked very happy. It was a kind remark from a person who saw my relief at finishing months of hard work. Though he knew nothing about the grief with which I was battling, his remark represented a recognition of me as a fellow human being rather than just as a foreign student interviewing people struck by drought. The encounter constituted a relation of care that humanized both the researched and the researcher. This moment of connectedness illustrates the juxtaposition of sorrow and enchantment, underlining how vulnerability relations are both painful, asymmetric and productive. The small, subtle, but significant moments can often be important empirical entry points in compassionate vulnerability research.

My encounter with the elderly man illustrates how data collection means sourcing moments of shared existential vulnerability as connectedness. Such moments constitute a ripe space for enquiring what vulnerability really means in people’s lives and how they are nested in socio-natural relations. In a more compassionate framing of my research, careful reflections around why my interpersonal encounter with the elderly man made an impression might have changed how I analyzed data, or indeed what I counted as data to try to understand local vulnerability. Generally, we are taught not to ascribe much significance to the emotional response we have to such encounters, as well as not let an acute sense of inadequacy in the meeting with people who have experienced suffering get in the way of “objective” research. In this paper, I have argued that we need to work with these personal impressions as an important resource that can help us gain insight into what it is that we have observed. What does the importance of personal loss and sense of being ignored mean for how we understand vulnerability as well as aid interventions? How can we even begin to understand vulnerability to floods or droughts and associated adaptation interventions without connecting in a compassionate way to what they mean to people in terms of bereavement and social position? Compassionate research means seeking to identify with—not be apart from—the vulnerability that binds us together.

As several of the vulnerability encounters described in this paper illustrate, the deeper, grim realities of the lived experiences of vulnerability to climate change come alive when engaging in interpersonal encounters as moments of co-suffering and connectedness. Yet, my encounter with the elderly man is a striking example of the need to simultaneously give space to the enchantment of moments of compassionate connectedness. Being attuned to others involves not only being able to witness the uncomfortable; humanizing relations and holding sorrow that allows action to emerge from the daily lived experience of vulnerability (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2011) entail appreciating the joy, generosity and compassion that can flow in a research
situation. The dark subject of climate change vulnerability can only be understood through also embracing its more hopeful sides: how vulnerability as connectedness is a productive force in personal-political agency.

This paper probes how inserting the interlinked ideas of compassion and a shared humanity can help open up new possibilities for ethical and political action in the face of climate change. A compassionate knowing emphasizes vulnerability as a potentially positive relational force grounded in its universality, implying that there is an alternative to responding with denial, self-protection or isolation that ultimately exacerbate the problems, and instead respond to vulnerability with compassion and a sense of shared humanity. Rather than the inner world dimensions being objects to be changed in order to leverage transformation, the personal-political is the subject of processes of change. Hence the personal-political must be understood and tapped into in order to direct socially just transformations towards climate resilient development. In order to overcome the limitations of rational-cognitive forms of knowing sustainability that are not only insufficient but also often alienating, differentiating and disempowering, climate change research needs to engage much more seriously with emotional forms of knowing, such as compassionate vulnerability. Climate resilient development may be less about identifying discrete adaptation and mitigation options, and more about fostering compassionate relations that can generate compassionate climate actions in diverse forms. Such an approach involves shifting relations characterized by social differencing, inequity and inaction towards connectedness and social justice (Sharma, 2017; Whyte, 2020; Wolfe and Tubi, 2019), similar to Toronto’s approach to including respect, trust, reciprocity, and care in climate change adaptation (Bond and Barth, 2020). Engaging with the emotional and personal dimensions of vulnerability simultaneously drives home the stark suffering and injustices experienced by those in vulnerable situations, but also brings with it the positive power of hope and care, and potentially transformative knowledges and actions.

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ORCID iD

Siri H Eriksen  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6594-2758

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**Author biography**

**Siri Eriksen** is a Professor of Climate and Development at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. She holds a PhD from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. Her work focuses on vulnerability to climate change, the politics of adaptation, and climate resilient development with fieldwork in Eastern and Southern Africa and Norway.