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Young people's reactions to nuclear issues:  
A constructivist analysis

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

The 1980s saw an increasing interest amongst psychologists, both as researchers and as practitioners, in the ways in which people react to nuclear weapons issues, especially the perceived threat of nuclear war. Much of the research in relation to "nuclear threat", undertaken either within the United States or by United States psychiatrists in collaboration with European colleagues, and using extensive questionnaire surveys, focused on the fears of children and teenagers. Some researchers concluded that large proportions of young people were at risk of impaired psychological development because of nuclear threat which resulted in a pervasive sense of futurelessness and a distrust of adults. This research has been widely criticised since because of apparent researcher bias in the methods used, interpretations offered, and general paradigm. I also found much of the research ethically objectionable.

My research has involved 52 interviews with young New Zealanders and administration of a questionnaire to more than 2000 others, including ages nine to 18 and three ethnocultural groups, as well as interviews with some teachers. The objectives of these studies were: (1) to produce detailed information about how young New Zealanders react to nuclear weapons issues which might be used by educationalists, mental health professionals, parents, and young people themselves in dealing with those issues; (2) to make specific recommendations about young New Zealanders' apparent needs and preferences for learning about and dealing with nuclear weapons and related issues; (3) to provide a detailed methodological comparison of interview and questionnaire approaches to this research topic, and discuss issues of theory and paradigm; and (4) to comment on ethical and practical issues for both the researcher and the researched in undertaking research on emotive and potentially distressing topics, especially with young people. As a result Chapter 1 of my thesis contains a comprehensive critical review of the international research and theory relating to young people's perceptions of nuclear weapons, examining the problems of method, interpretation and paradigm associated with this area of research.

Both interview and survey data are presented in relation to: (a) young people's levels of awareness and sources of information about nuclear issues; (b) their emotional, cognitive and behavioural reactions to nuclear issues,

including coping strategies and activism; (c) their perceptions of the future; (d) comparisons across gender, age and ethnocultural group; (e) the role of adults; and (f) differences between New Zealanders and other national groups. The data are discussed in terms of: (i) their patterns, contexts and meanings; (ii) their implications for peace and global issues education; and (iii) their implications for research method, including ethical issues. Recommendations are made for how psychologists and others can help young people and adults in dealing with global and social threats, including how to undertake research which is empowering as well as valid and useful.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the honesty of kids and teenagers, the integrity of the earth, and the many marvelous women in Aotearoa<sup>1</sup> who are educating for peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the name "Aotearoa" is used interchangeably with "New Zealand". This usage reflects my acknowledgement of Maori as tangata whenua, and constitutes a personal contribution to te tino rangatiratanga.

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