Disaster Management and the Role of Community in a Post-Modern Age.

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This paper seeks to address the issue of disaster and risk management by starting with the concept of community and not from the risk itself. Firstly, drawing upon research currently being conducted in Australia into vulnerability and resilience for Emergency Management Australia this paper questions whether many risk managers understand the complexities involved in understanding and working with ‘the community’. Also questioned is whether such managers understand where the individual ‘fits in’ to our societies and if individuals are missed within recovery processes as they don’t fit within the ‘boxes’ that are used to categorise people. In a post-modern world sociology has much to offer by providing disaster managers with a more clearly defined understanding of the world in which they operate, and, ways of incorporating ‘the community’ into risk and disaster management and recovery.

Secondly, the forces at work within communities due to the effects of globalisation, neo-liberalism or radical laissez faire (referred to generally as economic rationalism in Australia), and demographic developments are also dealt with here. For example, the apparent move from social to individual rights with a subsequent drop in volunteerism in Western societies. This drop coincides with an ageing population with the younger people being seemingly less likely to take on volunteer roles. Yet so much of the management of ‘risk' in countries such as Australia is dependent upon there being a ready access to volunteers.

Thirdly, recognition is needed that a ‘militaristic’, ‘top-down’ approach, may not be the most effective one in dealing with community recovery. Yet there are pitfalls in using the ‘bottom-up’, ‘community centred’ methods. A combination of the two approaches may be the best way to operate. People need to ‘own’ the processes for them to be most effective in the long term.

Fourthly, for people to feel secure, they usually need to feel that they belong to a stable network that supplies a safe environment for themselves and their families. This in turns develops their resilience and lessens their vulnerability.

The research underpinning this article is derived from two sources. As well as the current research into vulnerability and resilience being conducted in Australia with Philip Buckle and Sydney Smale I have also utilised my findings from earlier research in the field of local government and community participation. This was a study of three cities comparing local community participation in St Kilda and Knox in Australia and Lewisham in England and the policies and practices of these local authorities.

1. The importance of understanding what is community and its variations.

The concept of community is of obvious importance within the context of risk and emergency management and it is a most used and abused and misunderstood term. Too often it is used in a sweeping fashion without the recognition that all the people involved in a disaster or crisis may have in common is that they live in the vicinity of the risk. Community is also used to describe everyone living in the whole state eg the ‘Victorian’ (a State in Australia) Community. There is also too often a basic assumption that there is an actual community living in the affected area that can be rebuilt or re-bonded. The assumption is that, besides their living within the same boundaries; there was actually a group of people present who had
something in common who were bonded together in some form whereas they may have been in conflict
with each other or may have had very little contact prior to the event. They may have no interests in
common; no common bonds which go beyond proximity.

This paper asks whether this assumption of there being a community which exists and can be
consulted is based on a fallacy and seeks to provide an appropriate set of definitions, placing the need to
understand the concept of community firmly in the risk management context. Such communities may exist
but much community profiling and analysis must be performed before one can make this assumption. From
the outset, we must understand that one's community is to be found both in neighbourhoods and within
communities of interest, which may reach across geographic and even national boundaries, as people
identify with them. They may coincide but not always. (see The Community Unconscious Diagram). I say
Community Unconscious because actors in the process, the local authority and the residents may have no
real awareness of the state of affairs of the other party or even what their own needs and risks are. It can be
in Marx’s terms a ‘false consciousness’ or there may be no ‘consciousness’ at all. In some cases the only
contact residents may have with their local authority is through the delivery of services while they have
very little contact with fellow residents, confining themselves to a few family or friendship networks. As
well, what we found in our research into vulnerability in rural Victoria was that time and time again there
was a deep distrust towards the government with an accompanying feeling of isolation. The government
may on the other hand have little or even no understanding of the needs and desires of many of its citizens,
confining their consultation, for example, to a narrow band of interest groups as outlined in the diagram.

As outlined in the diagram, which is based upon my research and observations as a community
activist (who was one of the lucky ones consulted), councils may believe that they have consulted the
community over an issue when all that has occurred in too many cases is that consultation was with a select
few individuals or interest groups. The majority of people may have limited or no connection with those
selected. In some cases the residents’ ideology or value systems differ from that of the authorities and they
find themselves largely excluded from the processes. Random telephone consultation of residents on issues
is used more and more often and this does mean that under such circumstances the processes are more
inclusive. However, even then, without adequate consultation and information dissemination myths abound
about what councils and other forms of government do or do not do.

The most important thing to be said is that there's no such thing as THE COMMUNITY. Each of
us belongs to a number of communities that may or may not be geographically based. They are even then
most likely to be interest based (Ife 91-3).

Knowledge of community for those actors involved in the field of emergency management is
important, particularly if a community centred approach is adopted rather than an agency centred one. But,
what is ‘community”? It is very difficult to categorise what is a community. Community is diversity (Bell
and Newby (1971) and Willmott (1989). Community is such a loose term. We use it often interchangeably
with friends, networks, groups, voluntary associations, pressure groups and even social movements. Within
local councils generally it is often applied in a spatial sense to the citizens living within the confines of their
city or to neighbours who may not even know or talk to each other. In many situations neighbours may
have no sense of belonging to, or connection with the city or neighbourhood - there is no ‘glue’ within their
geographic areas that bonds the residents together, which creates a unified force. And why should there be
when all they may have in common is the closeness in proximity of their dwellings? We must also
recognise that 'community' should apply, when emergency management is involved, not just to the residents
but to industry, businesses, schools, services etc and even to any visitors to the area at a particular time.
Any local area will also be composed of residents who vary from those most able to cope due to age,
wealth, resources, both physical and intellectual, and with adequate access to information to those most
vulnerable, with limited access to these resources, and most at risk if a disaster or crisis occurs. There are also those who are just coping with life who are on no one’s list as being ‘at risk’ yet a disaster can push him or her over the edge in to the vulnerable category. It is essential then for emergency managers to ensure that they have accurate, up to date community profiles available at the time of a crisis and during the recovery period and that the local and visiting people’s needs be closely monitored to ensure that the ‘net’ does not miss some of the ‘at risk’ citizens.

For many people a ‘feeling of community’, of a common cause, of meaningful relationships with one’s neighbours is lacking as their value systems, their interests and activities are different. Occasionally the promise that residents may be empowered through uniting with their neighbours has affect, but, too often, even that promise fails to lead to ongoing participation. One last point on this would be that even when the neighbours do communicate with each other, feeling a common bond, this does not necessarily lead to participation in local issues or the development of community.

Mabileau, A., Moyser, G., Parry, G., and Quantin, P. (1989: 190) in their research in the United Kingdom and France discounted the idea that “individuals live in communities which are characterised by a certain sense of solidarity and common identity” which are formed simply by living in a particular locality.” They questioned this ‘community identification’ theory which holds that in such ‘communities’ residents are likely to have an intention...to act in certain ways towards one another, to respond to each other in particular ways, and to value each other as a member of a group.

Mabileau et al. believed that “a person’s notion of a community is inextricably related to that person’s ideological stance on a range of other values. Thus, the attributes of a community will be significantly different for a person on the left compared to someone on the right. Potentially, this should in turn affect the types of issues and actions taken in pursuit of community values. [They also suggested the] possibility that locality and community are entirely irrelevant in the modern era...that people are moved by interests that transcend locality, with class, status or profession. Indeed, some may regard these as non-spatial communities (1989: 190/1).

Within any one neighbourhood or city there will then be many diverse communities and within each of these there will be many diverse opinions, value systems and norms. Each individual may belong to a number of unconnected communities even within the local council boundaries or for example within their ethnic group and yet have no meaningful relationships with their neighbours. My observations as a participant observer as part of my research into community participation at the level of local government led me to draw the following conclusions:

...despite the best of intentions, policies and publicity on the part of councils and local activists, communities will not form, nor will citizens participate, unless the circumstances are such that individuals will recognise the necessity of joining with other residents in a common cause and will be enabled in doing so.

Within the boundaries of the three local governments many potential ‘communities of interest’ existed as the citizens had similar interests at stake that were under threat from their local and other authorities. However, this potential to come together as a community with a common cause was, too often, not realised even when the residents had similar ideologies. Conflict was often present, as was the opportunity to compete for scarce economic, political and social...
resources, all of which would normally assist in the development of communities yet still many residents failed to establish themselves as communities and particularly to ‘participate’.

To summarise and provide some definitions then:

• Proximity does not always equal community in fact in many geographic areas there may be a number of communities often in conflict with each other. Even outside threats eg development or response to a disaster may not lead to a community developing or to re-bonding as there may not have been any community togetherness prior to the event.

• For Max Weber: Community = “belonging together ... sharing a common culture, interaction and institutionalisation of central activities” (Ife 90).

• Going beyond the mere geographic or spatial description, community involves a sense of belonging & commitment. Time is involved in developing a community. It is a process and not a passive never changing concept.

• Community equals shared solidarity; its source is a common set of interests, values & attitudes. It may form as a result of external pressures. Conflict may occur between opposing interest groups and lead to community formation. (Ife 91) Membership = obligation.

• For Ron Wild and Jim Ife: People are often not aware of the communities to which they belong. They simply EXIST (Ife Ps 14-17 & 89-94).

**EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF COMMUNITIES.**

Despite what has been said before, risk managers need then to be aware the types of communities which may exist within their local boundaries. They also need to recognise that some people may belong to none of these communities within these boundaries, nor may they have any ongoing/in depth relationship with other residents beyond their close family or small circle of friends. There's a lack of unity in our cities yet people still refer to THE COMMUNITY while communities of interest may actually lead to divisions in geographic communities - segmenting not integrating

**SOME OF THE TYPES THEN ARE:**

**OF AFFECTION OR OF FUNCTION:** e.g. religious or ethnic, class or gender when they have emotional ties with each other, where there's a group sharing something together. (Ife 92)

**OF COMPETITION:** where groups come together - in sentiment - as they compete for economic, political &/or social interests which leads to community solidarity.

For Tonnies: Community equals a homogenous grouping where individuals are treated as whole persons. Social control is informal whereas in Western countries there's been a shift to the “society” - to a shift from communal/familial relations to individualism. Friendships etc. are lessened & social control & relationships are much more formalised; much more terrifying for some. Law and contracts are very important for Tonnies in the binding together of society particularly when competition is present (Ife 16).

**COMMUNITIES OF STATUS, GENDER GROUPINGS & INTERESTS:** e.g. manual workers, professionals, farmers, service workers, non-paid residents (retired, unemployed, home duties).

**OF THE SPATIAL OR LOCAL COMMUNITY:** using a broader definition of community that is used by councils, community agencies etc. & particularly encompassing a geographic area. At the
extremes, which can include isolation from other towns and cities, it may be centred round work/industry-with shipbuilding or mining or other areas with farming where services and networks develop around the particular industry and its workforce.

Suburbs may be referred to as dormitory ones with residents supposedly simply using the area to sleep in but work/services are still important and large numbers of people do live there and spend most of their time there. For example, children, retirees, mothers at home raising the children and the unemployed.

There's a lack of unity in our cities yet actors, including professionals and resident, at the local level still refer to THE community while communities of interest may actually lead to divisions in geographic communities - segmenting not integrating. The task ahead of workers in the emergency management fields is to recognise this as a reality and to endeavour to bring the various communities of interest together during the community recovery process. It’s quite likely that these people will join together as a matter of course and necessity but the recovery leaders do need this awareness. A further task is to ensure that those residents or visitors not involved in these interest communities are also not excluded from the recovery processes or, even prior to this stage, the risk management planning.

2. The forces at work within communities due to the effects of globalisation, neo-liberalism (economic rationalism) and demographic developments.

The second point I wish to make is that many developments that affect a locality are often beyond the control of local residents and even local authorities yet the changes which result may be far reaching. Deborah Lupton (1999, P 75) in writing on Giddens’ (1990) view of risk, reflexivity and the conditions of modernity wrote that

The progressive separation of space, place and time and the increasing role played by disembedding mechanisms – all depend upon trust, vested not in individuals but in ‘abstract capacities’. People now cannot simply rely on local knowledges, tradition, religious precepts, habit or observation of others’ practices to conduct their everyday lives, as they did in pre-modern and early modern times. Rather they must look principally to experts they do not personally know and are unlikely ever to meet to supply them with guidelines.

As Lupton had said earlier in her work, as she commented on the work of Ulrich Beck, “people must deal. therefore, with uncertainty: conventional social order seems to be breaking down in the face of the undermining of old uncertainties” (1999 P67).

The impact of the ‘modernisation processes’ on ‘community’ and subsequently on emergency management has been profound. For example, with the rise of neo-liberalism bringing with it a lack of certainty together with an emphasis on individualization within western societies, we’ve experienced a move from social to individual rights with a subsequent drop in volunteerism. This drop coincides with an ageing population with the younger people being seemingly less likely to take on volunteer roles. Yet so much of the management of ‘risk’ in countries such as Australia is dependent upon there being a ready access to volunteers if the fires are to be put out, the storm and flood damage cleaned up and the affected residents assisted.

Globalisation also has its affects and these are often paralleled with the affects of economic rationalism and of demographic developments. Trends we have noted in our research into vulnerability in Australia have shown the following to be the case.
1 Communities may disintegrate rather than develop when changes in the work place occurs due to e.g. factory closure, failure of industry to maintain its position, e.g. a fruit industry or mining company. Single industry towns are very vulnerable.

2 Government decisions (which includes often a policy of non-interference) on deregulation, railways, freeways, schools, council amalgamations and regionalisation all lead to growth or decline in rural and regional cities in particular. These decisions have affected many regions of Australia that has seen the growth of regional centres and capital cities to the detriment of the smaller towns. Services (physical, and social) associated with having a local council in the town are no longer present following amalgamation and this places the towns more at risk if a disaster occurs. Leadership which comes with the staff and councillors is also absent from the community.

3 Decisions to change farming practices from traditional farming to blue gum and pine plantations to service overseas’ needs for wood pulp is having a massive impact upon rural Australia. Farmers are paid an exorbitant price for their land, retire from the farm and the local area has suddenly fewer people.

4 The changes in technology due to computerisation affects a town: e.g. banking technology means fewer staff are needed which leads to closure = unemployments of youths and the loss of bank families and of professional talent and leadership in the community and the cycle continues. People go outside of the town to do their banking and that further impacts on the ‘community’s’ infrastructure as people shop in the regional cities where the banks and supermarkets are situated. The butcher or grocer close and people are forced to shop elsewhere and other shops close.

5 With fewer children around, which is then exacerbated with youths moving to the cities for education and not returning and raising families, schools and churches close and even more leadership and children (i.e. of the teachers and ministers) are lost to the town. The loss of young people leads to the disintegration of sporting teams that form the basis of many networks.

6 Stagnant towns = youths move = more stagnation. The loss of services in a town leads to a loss of leadership, always replenished in the past, and a loss of volunteers both of which are needed for the tasks associated with community recovery.

7 Newly arrived residents who may have been attracted to the cheap housing and country lifestyle may be treated with suspicion and even hostility by the ‘locals’. They may subsequently be excluded from the social networks in the town. On the other hand these new arrivals may exclude themselves from these networks as their vales, their ‘culture’ may be at odds with those of the more established residents. For example we were informed by some respondents that the culture of the Country Fire Authority was too ‘macho’ and (these two women) would not encourage their children to join. Mutual exclusion then may occur. We were also advised that “single parents were a problem” as they did not fit in. Couple this exclusion of people with the changes in values and ideology which has accompanied neo-liberalism and you have a dramatic decline in membership of emergency services and other voluntary organizations.

3. Emergency managers need to have an understanding of terminology and of the trends operating within their locality if they are to operate effectively.

Due to these developments outlined in 2 above and to forces normally at work within any locality, emergency managers also need to have an understanding which delves deeper into the concepts associated with ‘community, for example, clear definitions of ‘community participation” including who are those residents most likely to participate, ‘community education” and development.

From my research on participation at the level of local government, the actual circumstances present at a particular time within a person’s life-cycle and in a particular local area determined: who the participants in local issues were at the level of local government; how many people gathered, understood
what was in their perceived best interests and contributed to individual and group goals and directions; what
their responses would be and the effectiveness of these responses. Different responses were present in
neighbouring streets, not only due to conflict over ideological views and to support or non-support for
proposed development, but because differences existed in the residents’ commitment to activism.

In some neighbourhoods a single community formed centred on a particular issue; in others,
separate communities often at variance with each other formed despite the issue being the same for both
neighbourhoods; while in others there was a complete lack of any cohesive response to a particular threat or
issue.

What was evident from the surveys in the three cities (St Kilda and Knox in Australia and
Lewisham in London) was that not only did the majority of residents not form or join a community group to
address an issue, 58 per cent of them had never taken up any issue individually with their council. This was
despite the fact that in the many of areas surveyed there were substantial issues needing to be addressed.
Tapping into networks, which is the policy of many emergency managers when seeking to consult or to
inform, is then likely to not reach many of the residents in a local area.

The St Kilda residents surveyed were the most likely to have taken up one issue or more, perhaps
because they were the most highly educated of the respondents from the three cities. The implications of
such findings for emergency managers needs to be taken into account in any recovery programs. Many
residents just do not have the skills necessary to participate in such programs nor do they have access to
information that would help them in the understanding of such processes. These residents too often
believed that their council did not keep them informed of what was happening. We found the same
expressions f concern with residents in our vulnerability research. In both cases councils had endeavoured
to inform and consult with these residents but with little affect. If the residents do not want to be informed
or if they are selective in what they choose to believe then consultation and information dissemination is an
up-hill battle for any authority.

From this research in the three cities, the participant is most likely to be: of either sex; married and
more likely with children having left home; over thirty-six and in most cases under sixty-five; a house or
flat owner; retired or employed part time or full time and only rarely unemployed; educated with a post
graduate degree or, at the other extreme, to primary level only (70 per cent of these respondents were in the
retired category and the trend will die out with them); and a member of one or more organisations -
particularly a school parent committee or a sporting group and perhaps slightly less so of a church or
political party. These trends may vary in rural areas as it may be a tradition that residents join emergency
services and country associations.

From the research in these three cities, circumstances, including the mechanisms established by the
council enabling participation and information dissemination, determined:

- The composition, if one was formed, of a group of like-minded citizens at any one time;
- How residents viewed their neighbourhood (was it a temporary abode, a dormitory to go home
to?);
- The degree of conflict and competition for scarce resources present which might aid community
formation;
- Whether empowerment of the less privileged existed;
- Whether any residents were aware of policies and proposals that may have affected them;
- If residents who were aware subsequently contacted fellow residents;
• The commonality of the residents including the ideological approaches present (for example conservative or altruistic or Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY);
• The degree of community concern, competence and the effectiveness of any submission presented by them;
• The skills available to the community; the level of access they had to the council; and, how comfortable residents felt in their dealings with the bureaucracy in particular.

While the composition of the community was important, it was not simply the ‘haves’ who formed communities and participated while the ‘have nots’ did not. While the haves are the most likely participants, and are therefore most likely to be positive beneficiaries of the recovery processes, these people also have often been excluded from the participatory processes or they may have excluded themselves. Prior to most effective participation of any citizen occurring, the long-term, full development of the citizen particularly in the area of skills development needs to be present and many of the haves also feel that they are lacking in this field.

To summarise then, proximity does not always equal community in fact in many geographic areas there may be a number of communities often in conflict with each other. Even outside threats eg development or response to a disaster may not lead to a community developing or to re-bonding as there may not have been any community togetherness prior to the event. And yet emergency managers must recognise and deal with such diversity and work out ways and means that they can bring all of the affected groups and individuals together. In may situations the circumstances will lead to a working together at least for the early stages of recovery, to a reliance on others perhaps previously regarded with distrust or even unknown. All of these machinations need to be closely monitored then.

I do not have any easy answers as to how emergency managers should manage risk as it relates to the community. However I do believe that they should be working towards understand the dynamics of their locality and of the various interest communities within their boundaries. How do they interact? What is their relationship with the local authorities? Will any conflict retard a full recovery following a disaster and if so, how can this be overcome? Who are the vulnerable and who may have been passed over, unnoticed in the recovery period or not planned for in the earlier stages of risk management? These managers should be constantly developing community profiles whilst informing the residents of the risks and how they together should be managing these in the future. For effective community recovery to occur then the local residents – the stakeholders – should be heavily involved in managing their recovery. Emergency managers and authorities should offer ‘communities’ resources, skills and opportunities whilst recognising that in the end recovery and future resilience will depend upon the people, the ‘communities’ themselves being enabled to manage for themselves.

Bibliography

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Community Diagram. The whole square is the geographic area (local community); The smaller squares represents governments of all levels who may have on-going contact with just a few local organisations (see the cluster of circles) with whom they consult as 'representatives' of the wider 'community'. This cluster consists of, for example, service clubs, political parties, traders, community and residents' groups, neighbourhood associations and special interest groups. The circles = groups and overlap; where the circles go outside the square is where the community of interests goes beyond the geographic boundaries and the narrow ovals are where there are narrow interest groups; The Star = individuals or families who may have no or little contact in the community and these people may make up the majority of residents; + = carers of the elderly etc. who have little chance to mix with others. The octagon represents small groups, such as single parents, who may be new in a town and may only have contact with other parents, if that, through a small range of related services.