



Displacement: Critical insights from flood-affected children

Maggie Mort^{a,*}, Marion Walker^a, Alison Lloyd Williams^a, Amanda Bingley^b

^a Dept of Sociology, Bowland North, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA14YT, UK

^b Division of Health Research, Lancaster University, UK



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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how children and young people are affected by evacuation following flooding. Participatory research using creative methods allowed us to elicit flood stories and recovery pathways over time. We found that children's relationships with space and place were severely challenged following evacuation from home. They suffered losses, including loss of agency, friendship networks and familiar space. They experienced distress, anxiety and disillusionment with societal responses. Sustained attention by flood risk and recovery agencies is required to address children's ongoing needs following evacuation. From policymakers recognition is overdue that young people are citizens who already contribute to community flood response and so need to be more explicitly consulted and included in the development of flood risk management.

1. Introduction

Within social studies of disaster, it has long been recognised that the recovery process sheds light on many pre-existing social vulnerabilities that gave rise to the disaster in the first place (Erikson, 1976; Blaikie et al., 1994; Smith, 2006; Mutter, 2008). What gets rebuilt, restored or discarded reveals what is valued by the community or wider society (Miller and Rivera, 2007; Klein, 2007; Dhakar Tribune, 2017). In the wake of destruction, questions are asked about the value of what has been lost and this rightly includes social as well as economic value; it includes memory and meaning, as well as property and possessions. Yet little is known about how children value the places and spaces they inhabit. A recent exception can be found in Ergler et al.'s collection (2017a, 2017b); in their Introduction they point out that children 'seek agency in their everyday lives'. They note however that such agency is constrained by environments 'designed to facilitate the lives of adults...'. Yet how they experience or possibly resist, their surroundings impacts on children's health and wellbeing (2017:1).

One of the consequences of the recent disaster at Grenfell Tower in West London has brought into the sharpest relief debates about the effects of displacement. Following the devastating tragic fire, struggles continue over maintaining certain continuities such as networks of trust, social relations, safe routes to school and familiar spaces. These struggles are being played out at different political scales and against a background of austerity policies. This disaster is forcing re-examination in the UK of housing policies, the social organisation of neighbourhoods and even what it means to relocate a school (Weale, 2017). Current initiatives include a creative project where young people are using

virtual reality technology to reimagine and help redesign the space left behind when the Tower itself is eventually demolished (O'Brien, 2018, personal communication)

In the case of flooding, the UK's highest rated civil emergency (Cabinet Office, 2017), recent research has illuminated how recovery is often very lengthy, in which the path is far from linear, with unpredictable and severe twists and turns (Medd et al., 2014) and involving considerable reorientation (Cox and Perry, 2011). We also know that the recovery phase can sometimes be more traumatic than the flood itself particularly if the societal response is uncomprehending or uncaring (Whittle et al., 2010; Tapsell and Tunstall, 2008). One study shows that for adults, it is evacuation and displacement following a flood that has the greatest negative impact on their health and wellbeing (Walker-Springett et al., 2017), yet the experience of flood displacement for children remains underexplored.

An earlier study revealed some of the complexities experienced by flood-affected children in the UK. These included the long-term effects of living in temporary accommodation, re-locating to a different school, family tensions at home exacerbated by flood-related financial worries and the fear of recurring disaster (Walker et al., 2010, 2012; Mort et al., 2016). Living with these changes and uncertainties was particularly problematic for groups of children following the 2007 floods in Hull, Northern England, who later told us they felt there was nowhere to turn for help. The disruption the floods caused to their homes, schools and friendship networks were seen to impact on children's physical and emotional health (Whittle et al., 2012).

Landmark studies conducted by Weber and Peek (2012) and Fothergill and Peek (2015) following the 2005 floods in New Orleans in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: m.mort@lancaster.ac.uk (M. Mort).

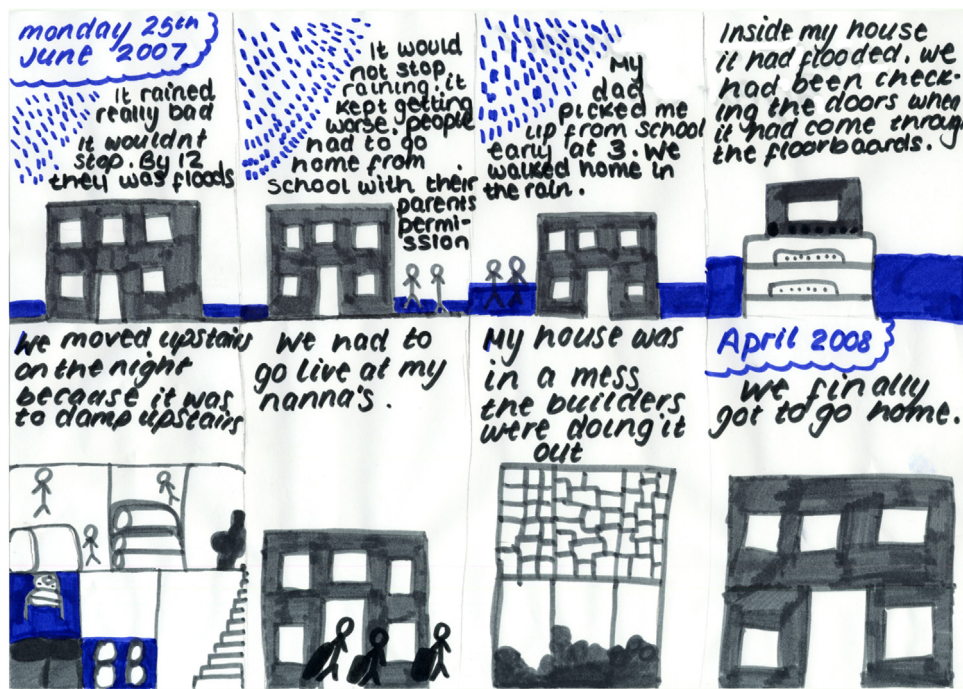


Fig. 1. Rachel's storyboard.

the wake of Hurricane Katrina, explored ways that forms of displacement shaped the lives of children over the medium and longer term in the wake of the US diaspora. Towards the end of their work children told them that participating in the study and having their flood stories made public opened up the possibility of helping others and had a positive effect on their recovery (2015: 267).

For this paper this we focus on material collected for our research with children following the severe floods of 2013/4 in England. This allows us to offer some insights into particular ways in which children's health and wellbeing are negatively affected by displacement and ways that policy might be improved to mitigate these effects. We have found that children's accounts highlight how material/spatial displacement is strongly intertwined with social dislocation.

A distinguishing feature of this project was to bring children's experiences of flooding, their practices of resilience and their views about what might have helped them recover into dialogue with policy makers and practitioners. In this way, children's insights, learned through the research, could be made to 'travel' further, engaging with stakeholders such as flood risk managers, insurers, emergency planners, and be recognised in policy development. [Children's recommendations and the implications for policy have been published elsewhere, see [Mort et al., 2016](#)].

Below we first introduce some of the detail which emerges from child-centred approaches to flood research and explain the methods which underpinned our findings. We then present four stories from our research in which young people articulate how the floods affected their lives. Finally, we draw out some commonalities and implications for flood risk related policy and practice development.

2. Floods reveal complex cumulative social vulnerability in young people's lives

Finding ways to understand more about children's lives before, during and after disaster is crucial to understanding the meaning and effects of that disaster since, as [Fothergill and Peek \(2015: 23\)](#) argue, 'the disaster may be a stressor or crisis on top of other serious issues or constraints the child is already confronting'. Working closely with 650 children in the Katrina diaspora over seven years they found that young

people's accounts uncovered the daily contingencies of displaced lives, raising questions about vulnerability but also the factors that aid recovery and resilience. The authors critique the adultist ways that disaster-affected children are often viewed, which only serve to hinder children's recovery. First, there is the myth that children will 'bounce back' like rubber balls, without any outside assistance, because children are 'naturally resilient'; second, there is the helpless victims myth that views children as fragile and renders them incapable of acting in the face of a disaster; and third is the equal opportunity events myth, which assumes that all children are affected equally by disaster ([Fothergill and Peek, 2015](#)).

As [Lindley et al. \(2011\)](#) point out, people experiencing poverty are more likely to live on a flood plain or close to coastal regions prone to flooding. Families living in rented accommodation in flood risk zones are at risk from forced evacuation by their landlord into a rental market where properties are increasingly scarce and more costly ([Whittle et al., 2010](#)); tenants also have to face the prospect of 'never coming back' or of having their rents pushed up after the refurbishment ([Walker et al., 2011](#)). Where families are living in homes without building or house contents insurance great hardship can result during flood recovery, with children having to endure living in damp unhealthy conditions, often with no end in sight ([Walker et al., 2010](#)). Working with the notion of cumulative vulnerability helps to make such inequalities visible.

Such complex inequality was shown in our earlier research in Hull when we adopted a 'storyboard' approach to help children (aged 9–18 years) articulate their flood stories with drawings and creative writing, moving into short one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions. Above Rachel's¹ storyboard ([Fig. 1](#)) illustrates how the flood involved first moving upstairs, then moving out, only to return ten months later.

3. Developing methodology for working with flood affected children

We conducted our recent research in two contrasting (urban and rural) flood-affected communities, recruiting children and young

¹ All participants are referred to by their pseudonym.

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