



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging



The disaster flood experience: Older people's poetic voices of resilience☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 January 2015

Received in revised form 20 May 2015

Accepted 23 May 2015

Available online 9 June 2015

Keywords:

Ageing

Disaster experience

Floods

Older people

Poetic inquiry

Qualitative methods

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of older community-dwelling Australians evacuated from their homes during the 2011 and 2013 Queensland floods, applying the novel creative methodology of poetic inquiry as an analysis and interpretative tool. As well as exploring how older adults managed during a natural disaster, the paper documents the process and potential of poetic inquiry in gerontological research. The first and second poems highlight the different social resources older people have to draw on in their lives, especially during a crisis. Poem 1 ("Nobody came to help me") illustrates how one older resident felt all alone during the flood, whereas Poem 2 ("They came from everywhere"), Poem 3 ("The Girls") and Poem 5 ("Man in Blue Shirt") shows how supported – from both family and the wider community – other older residents felt. Poem 4 ("I can't swim") highlights one participant's fear as the water rises. To date, few studies have explicitly explored older adult's disaster experience, with this paper the first to utilise a poetic lens. We argue that poetic presentation enhances understanding of older residents' unique experiences during a disaster, and may better engage a wider audience of policy-makers, practitioners, the general community and older people themselves in discussion about, and reflection on, the impact and experience of disasters.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the diverse voices, processes and methodologies in the creative arts have begun to transform and disrupt traditional research paradigms. Although still in its formative stages, arts-based inquiry and research practices – such as literary writing, design, music, dance, visual art, film and performance – are increasingly being used to collect data, conduct analysis, interpret and/or communicate social research (Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 2007). Yet, despite increasing examples

of the positive impact of creative arts interventions such as storytelling, poetry, dance and music on older people's health and wellbeing in the gerontological literature (e.g., de Medeiros & Basting, 2014), research on creative arts as an analysis tool remains virtually non-existent. This paper aims to address this knowledge gap, utilising the novel creative arts methodology of poetic inquiry to explore, analyse and represent older people's experiences of the 2011 and 2013 Queensland floods, a slow-onset disaster. It documents the process and potential of poetic inquiry, providing examples for other gerontological researchers interested in using non-traditional arts-based methods as analysis, interpretation and communication tools.

Older people and natural disasters

Gerontological literature on older people's lived experience of disasters remains relatively rare with only a small handful of studies explicitly exploring the impact of significant weather events (SWE), such as floods. The reality is that despite older

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adults' ability to remain independent and cope in everyday situations, a SWE may push them over their coping threshold (Tuohy & Stephens, 2011, 2012), putting them at risk of becoming more vulnerable to the disaster. Their high vulnerability has been related to individual characteristics which may increase their susceptibility to the impact of SWE such as: having chronic illnesses that need specific treatment interventions, changes in sensory and organ function, difficulties in adapting to and coping with exposure to heat, cold, sunlight, dampness and bad weather; slower reaction times and psychosocial issues specific to older age including transition, loss and difficulties seeking assistance (Ardalan et al., 2009).

Research suggests that there is a negative correlation between the age of adult victims and the disaster recovery process (Quarantelli, 1993), with older adults experiencing higher mortality and morbidity rates than the rest of the population during a disaster (Cutter, Boruff, & Shirley, 2003). Statistics from recent disasters illustrate this: studies of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated disproportionately poorer outcomes for older adults; the Aceh (Indonesia) tsunami in 2004 recorded the highest death rates for those over 60 years (Tuohy & Stephens, 2011), and the death rate during the Paris heat wave in 2003 was highest for those over 70 years (Pirard et al., 2005). The greatest mortality during and immediately after 2005 Hurricane Katrina was amongst the elderly, who accounted for approximately 75% of the bodies found immediately after (Adams, Kaufman, Van Hattum, & Moody, 2011). Poverty and disadvantage were key contributing factors, with the Baylor College of Medicine (2006) reporting that 65% of the older adults in New Orleans who lived in their own homes lacked transportation options and/or were without the physical or mental ability to evacuate on their own.

Older adults and disaster resilience

In contrast to the above research, some earlier research suggests that elderly flood survivors are relatively resilient, tend to report fewer emotional effects and that prior experience of disasters may actually reduce adverse psychological effects (Huerta & Horton, 1978; Norris & Murrell, 1998). The argument is that the combination of chronological age, life experience and prior experience coping with disasters may lead to many older adults possessing more coping resources, and increased resilience. Resilience has been defined as a dynamic process maintaining successful/positive adaptation (or the absence of a pathological outcome) and effective coping strategies following exposure to stressful, potentially traumatic life events that have the potential to disrupt or destroy the successful function or development of the person (Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010; Masten & Obradović, 2008). In addition, resilience can be seen in those "achieving better than expected outcomes" and "displaying a practical adaptation to changing circumstances" (Wile, Wild, Kerse, & Allen, 2012). Behavioural examples of older adults displaying resilience during disasters include: providing support to family, friends and the local community; assisting in disaster recovery (community information centres); engaging with social networks to provide emotional support; and using the event (flood) as a source of spiritual growth or personal learning (Annear, 2013). Hooyman and Kiyak (2008) suggest that an older adult's ability to display

resilience depends on their understanding of the life changing event (flood), the scale of the event, prior experiences of similar events, and the accessibility of social support in the time immediately after the event has occurred.

In an attempt to better understand resilience, Tuohy (2009) interviewed nine older adults after the 2007 Kaitia floods in New Zealand. All were aged in their late 60s or older and had been evacuated from their homes because of rising flood waters. The interviews used open-ended questions that focused on the narratives (the story) of each individual's experience of the flood, then evacuation and the aftermath (e.g., "Tell me about your experience of the floods", "Tell me what happened the night you were evacuated", "Tell me what has happened since the evacuation"), with their thematic analysis reporting that these independent living older adults spoke about coping with limited assistance and the importance of treasured possessions, social support and the community. In interpreting these findings, Tuohy (2009) argue that given the appropriate supportive circumstances, an older adults' life time of experience provides resources for resilience and strength, rather than automatic vulnerability. More recently, Heppenstall, Wilkinson, Hanger, Dhanak, and Keeling (2013) qualitatively explored older adults (n = 50) and their informal caregivers (n = 34) experience of emergency evacuation during the 2011 Christchurch (New Zealand) earthquake. The overwhelming finding was a narrative of resilience during and after the disaster, with the majority (41/50) making positive comments that attributed their resilience to personal attitudes, life experiences, enhanced family support and social support. Critically, Kern and Friedman (2010) explain that resilience is not merely the act of recovering quickly from misfortune but involves flexibility and adaptability to stress, which appears with the appropriate combination of predispositions, behaviours, experiences and socio-environmental circumstances. Kern and Friedman (2010) emphasise that further research is needed to explore factors that facilitate resilience, advocating for multifaceted and new creative approaches designed to better understand an individual's unique experience, such as storying and poetic inquiry.

Storying in gerontological research

The concept of storying in later life is based on the principle that we are naturally predisposed to structure our lives into a story (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). As Andrews and colleagues note: "if we are constructed by stories, or are storytellers by nature, or perhaps both, then narrative must, surely, be a prime concern of social science" (2000: 1). It is difficult to give a single definition of narrative, and in part this is because it means different things to different researchers and is used in a multitude of ways by different disciplines (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). Elliot (2005) describes three key features of storying: they have some type of chronology, they are meaningful and they are social, or 'produced for a specific audience'. The psychology behind storying in later life is based on the assumption that an individual's experience and behaviour is meaningful, and that in order to understand ourselves and those around us, we need to explore the 'meaning systems' and 'structures' of meaning that make up our minds. In essence, making stories is how individuals create meaning; thus stories are central to how we learn, how we interact, how we experience our culture, and more important for this research

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