



The problem of community resilience in two flooded cities: Dhaka 1998 and Brisbane 2011



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ABSTRACT

This paper critiques the concept of urban community resilience by making a comparison of a flood disaster in two very different cities, Dhaka in Bangladesh and Brisbane in Australia. Community resilience is a concept that has emerged in the social sciences from ecological literature as a way of assessing and measuring the ability of communities to respond to and adapt following a disaster. In the literature the term 'resilience' is well defined, but 'community' is often presented as unproblematic. The flood recovery in Brisbane was the result of a strong public realm, strong institutions and a relatively low level of social inequality, with local community as a desirable, but not necessary, feature. In Dhaka the presence of strong local community was of little help to residents already living in absolute poverty; it is difficult to be resilient if its measure is decreasing long-term vulnerability. The absence of these city-wide institutions and a strong public realm meant that the poor in Dhaka were isolated; fated to rely on their own meagre resources. In neither case could resilience or the lack of it, be explained by local community. The effects of a trauma such as a flood cannot be understood by making general assumptions about communities as 'stand alone' phenomena with essentialised characteristics independent of context in which they are found.

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1. Introduction

A disaster is a stark opportunity for a 'social audit' of a city. It is where the extent to which an equitable allocation of social and economic resources is laid bare and the relative efficacy of its institutions can be compared with informal sources of support such as neighbourhoods, families and other networks. In this paper, I take the same category of disaster, a flood, and examine the experience of two vastly different cities, Dhaka in Bangladesh and Brisbane in Australia. The reason for this unlikely comparison is to make some observations and draw some conclusions about the efficacy of the concept of 'community resilience' across two very different urban environments.

Community resilience as a way of thinking about disaster response and recovery has been taken up in the social sciences in recent years from its origins in environmental and disaster literature (Cutter et al. 2008). Community resilience broadly describes the necessary qualities required of a 'community' for it to withstand and recover, or adapt, following a disaster (Bushnell & Cottrell,

2007; Coles & Buckle, 2004). In this paper I will argue that while 'resilience' is carefully defined in the literature, there has been less critical attention paid to the more contested, and perhaps difficult, idea of 'community' as it applies to resilience, particularly in the urban realm. Much of the literature treats community as *a priori* and takes as its focus community of propinquity, or the 'local community', as a necessary source of social and material support in a disaster without comparable attention to the wider structural conditions that mediate, necessitate or make local social networks redundant.

This assumption that a local community exists may be appropriate when small rural or coastal settlements are considered in the context of disaster response and recovery (Gomez-Baggethun, Reyes-Garcia, Olsson, & Montes, 2012; Murray & Zautra, 2012; Smith, Moore, Anderson, & Siderelis, 2012). These settlements have relatively small and often well-integrated institutional and social environments. They have discreet boundaries and might be sufficiently isolated to have little choice but to rely on local resources, including each other, in the event of a disaster. A focus on local communities in a metropolitan environment, however, is a far more tenuous proposition, as their fates must be considered in relation to the city as a whole. While place is important in cities, it

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needs to be understood in the context of the interconnected social complexity of cities, including institutions, inequalities and networks across time and space.

To highlight this gap in the theorisation of communities and resilience, I will use brief case studies of disasters in two very different urban contexts to investigate the relative importance of institutional and local forms of support in a disaster and the ways in which each of these places might be vulnerable or resilient as a result. The first case study is Brisbane, Australia, which in early 2011 experienced widespread flooding to approximately twenty percent of the 450 suburbs in the Brisbane metropolitan area (ABS, 2012). The second case study is Dhaka, Bangladesh, which experiences regular severe flooding and loss of life and is considered one of the most at-risk cities in the world from climate change (Al-Amin, Quasem, Kari and Alam 2013). The particularly severe floods of 1998 will be used as the principle case study in Dhaka, as these floods constitute a 'critical case' (Flyvbjerg, 2001) and there is a significant social science literature documenting these floods. Levels of affluence, institutional effectiveness and the instrumental usefulness of local community are clearly very different in each location. Using existing literature, the paper examines the ways in which different sources of support are used to mitigate vulnerability, how resilience manifests in each place as social and cultural constructions; and how and why the city as a whole rather than the local community might need to be considered to properly investigate these concepts.

1.1. Community resilience

Community resilience to disasters is an idea that has gained significant momentum in the last decade as a way for policy makers and practitioners to identify the strengths and vulnerabilities of particular populations threatened by disasters such as cyclones, floods and fires (Cutter et al. 2008; Donoghue & Sturtevant, 2007). The concept also has applicability for human induced disasters such as terrorist attacks (Coaffee, Murakami, Wood, & Rogers 2009). Resilience as a social concept has its roots in biological and ecosystems scholarship, where resilience is seen as the ability of organisms and ecosystems to either 'bounce back' to their original form following a major disruption (e.g. (Cumming, 2011; Shaw & Sharma, 2011; Ungar, 2012), or in the case of adaptation to future disasters, to 'bounce forward' (Manyena, Bernard, O'Brien, O'Keefe, & Rose, 2011).

The more social employment of the term 'resilience' has been used in the applied fields of the social sciences where an interest in community resilience has emerged over the last decade. In this emerging literature, the meaning of 'resilience' is carefully and often exhaustively defined, but with a relatively straightforward transition and interpretation from the natural sciences to the social world. In a widely cited application of the concept, Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, and Pfefferbaum (2008) describe resilience as "a process linking a set of networked adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation in constituent populations after a disturbance" (Norris et al. 2008: 127). Adaptive capacities are described as robust, redundant, or rapidly accessible resources available to a community, such as social capital, economic resources, community competence and information/communication (Norris et al. 2008). The availability of these resources to a community predicts a strong likelihood that the community will both recover from a disaster and be better adapted to future challenges. The major change in community resilience from more ecological definitions is that communities are understood to display agency in the way they prepare for, confront and recover from disaster.

1.1.1. Urban community

While resilience is exhaustively defined, the literature does not conceptualise the idea of 'community' with similar thoroughness. While it is axiomatic in urban scholarship that community, and particularly community of place, is a complex, contested and in many cases disappearing feature of contemporary urban social life, this complexity is rarely addressed in current conceptualisations of community resilience. The actual presence of a functioning, or at least a latent, community in a geographical location is frequently taken as *a priori* and its absence as pathology rather than a natural outcome of a more networked social domain (Landau, 2007; Lopez-Marrero & Tschakert, 2011; Sonn & Fisher, 1998).

The community implied by disaster resilience scholarship has a distinctly communitarian quality, consisting of 'shared community values' (Buckle, 2006: 97), a particular geography and a relative opaqueness about the dynamic, contested and contingent nature of community. Barrios, in one of the few critiques of this view of community observes: "... definitions of resilience build on the idea that communities are geographically circumscribed entities that have neatly delimited insides and outsides, and that remain somewhat constant over time" (Barrios, 2014: 329).

While much of the literature sets a high bar for the qualities that a community must possess in order to be considered resilient, the same studies resort to electoral or other administrative boundaries to determine the limits of those communities. Norris et al. do concede that community can be understood in various ways, but do not explore this, choosing instead to use the geographically bounded form of community: "Not always, but typically, a community is an entity that has geographic boundaries and shared fate" (Norris et al. 2008: 128). In another widely cited paper on measuring community resilience, Cutter et al. (2008: 599) describe a community as "the totality of social system interactions within a defined geographic space such as a neighbourhood, census tract, city, or county".

This poses the obvious problem of levying high expectations of communitarian functioning on what may be a community in name only. By taking a geographical or 'postcode' view of community, the concept is given a quantitative, rather than a qualitative ontology, missing the wider context and dynamic nature of contemporary urban life. An assumption of geographical community means that there is little discussion of the differences in how community is understood between rural and urban environments and across cultural contexts, for example between the affluent developed world and the global south - both of which are explored below. Case studies of disasters in different global contexts tend to come up with general remedies for disaster resilience that, like all attempts at universal generalisation, reduce conclusions and prescriptions for community resilience to the obvious or banal. For example, there are many examples that extol the power of social capital as a basis for disaster resilient communities in any context (e.g. Aldrich, 2012; Bankoff, 2007; Patterson, Weil, & Patel, 2010; Sherrieb, Norris, & Galea 2010). Social capital, or the benefits that individuals and communities derive from membership of social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000), is a powerful concept and there is little doubt that strong social networks provide material and emotional benefits in a disaster as a result of collective goals, coordinated action, good leadership and efficiency of effort. But much of the literature overlooks the specific socio-economic, political, structural and cultural conditions that lead to strong or weak reserves of social capital, instead focussing on the resources intrinsic to a geographical community, as if the community operated in a void. Similarly, communities are also attributed a level of agency that ignores the structural constraints of their wider context: "Endangered communities must be able to learn about their risks and options and work together flexibly and creatively to

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