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Flood of emotions: emotional work and long-term disaster recovery

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses concepts of emotion work and emotional labour to explore people's experiences of the long-term disaster recovery process. It draws on data taken from two qualitative research projects which looked at adults' and children's recovery from the floods of June 2007 in Hull, UK. The paper argues that the emotional work of recovery cannot be separated from the physical and practical work of recovering the built environment. It shows that a focus on emotion work can lead to a more nuanced understanding of what recovery actually means and who is involved, leading to the identification of hidden vulnerabilities and a better understanding of the longer timescales involved in the process.

1. Introduction

> Contrarily, and without apparent irony, the preferred story in a natural disaster is a good news one: miraculous rescues and escapes, acts of heroism and bravery, selfless rescue workers from Rotherham, sniffer dogs from Barking, saintly surgeons from Surbiton. As the hope of more wide-eyed victims being plucked from the grave diminishes, as the disaster medics wrap up their kit and go, so too do the 24-hour rolling-news teams. This is very expensive stuff, and nobody has the budget or the audience for the grim, dull depression of resurrection (Gill, 2010: 45).

The novelist AA Gill's bleak portrayal of life after the Haitian earthquake of January 2010, in which up to 230,000 people died and more than 1 million were made homeless, highlights a central problem in our attempts to understand and deal with disasters. While the event itself, and the emergency response and rescue phase that occupies the days immediately following the crisis, are the subject of both popular and political attention, the longer-term recovery process, and the emotions this entails, tends to be ignored by the wider media and the policy debates that follow. This paper explores recovery in the context of a very different kind of disaster – the Hull floods of 2007 in the UK. Here, again, statistics provide an indication of the breadth and depth of the impacts: The floods affected over 8600 households, one man died and 91 of the city's 99 schools were affected (Coulthard et al., 2007). Numbers can also be used to track the recovery process: how many people are back in their homes? How many schools and businesses have re-opened? To what extent are public services up and running? In the case of Hull, an independent review published five months after the flood reported that 2681 households were displaced from their homes with over 600 households living in caravans (Coulthard et al., 2007). In July 2008, a little over a year from the original event, 1476 people were shown to be still out of their homes, with 293 people still in caravans (Hull City Council, email communication, June 26, 2008). However, such statistics can disguise the complexity of who is affected and the processes by which such effects come into being (Walker et al., in press; Walker et al., 2010). While recovery is often measured in terms of the kinds of physical and economic milestones described here, we argue that there is an important emotional component to disaster recovery that goes unnoticed.

More specifically, while there is a growing body of work that highlights the place of emotions in disaster recovery (see for example Convery et al., 2008; Mort et al., 2004; Tapsell and Tunstall, 2008) our specific concern in this paper is to understand the role of *managing* emotions in flood recovery. To this end we follow Hochschild's distinction between 'emotional labour' and 'emotional work' to understand how individuals 'inhibit' or 'render'

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emotions 'appropriate' to a situation (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). However, our use of this distinction is complicated in three key ways because of the disruption caused by flood. First, during flood recovery the boundaries between the very places in which this distinction is applied in its original sense, namely 'work' and 'home', become blurred. Not only do 'homes' become the workplace of builders, insurers, inspectors etc., 'work' can also become a place where strong emotions about the disruption of home need to be 'managed'. In this sense we apply the concepts in relation to the role that an individual is in, rather than the boundary of place *per se*. For the most part we focus on the emotional work, though one case study illustrates the blurring of emotional work and emotional labour in a school setting. Secondly, and as an effect of the disruptions of place, as accounts of householders affected by flood reveal, the boundaries of what is 'appropriate' emotional expression are disrupted and subject to negotiation; in turn a source of further emotional strain. Finally, who is involved in emotional work and labour is also disrupted by the floods, namely the role that different family members as well as workers play.

Our paper draws upon examples from two qualitative research projects on flood recovery. The paper begins by detailing current understandings of disaster recovery before exploring ways in which a focus on emotion work and labour can enhance our knowledge in this area. This is followed by a methodology section which describes the two research projects on which this paper is based. The paper then moves on to discuss examples of the emotional work (and, in one case, labour) of flood recovery before finishing with a reflection on how paying attention to the process of managing emotions can enhance our understanding of long-term disaster recovery.

2. Disaster recovery

We started this paper with the claim that long-term disaster recovery tends to be neglected by the media and policy makers in comparison with the preparedness and emergency response phases of hazard management.[1] This was particularly apparent in the case of the UK floods of 2007 which prompted a wealth of policy documents – from the Flood and Water Management Act (HM Government, 2010), which initiates a more coordinated approach to flood risk management, through to consultations on the National Flood Emergency Framework (Defra, 2008b) and Property-Level Flood Resistance and Resilience Measures (Defra, 2008a). Long-term recovery is seldom discussed in these documents. In contrast, the Pitt Review (The Cabinet Office, 2008), the UK Government's review of the 2007 floods, devotes an entire chapter to recovery. It also includes a model of what it considers this process to be like (Fig. 1).

However, this model is flawed on a number of levels. Firstly, 'normality' is represented as a flat line, which ignores the ways in which every family goes through good times and bad times; times of celebration and times of crisis when more support may be needed (Baldassar, 2007). Secondly, and crucially, because the rapidly rising upwards curve implies that recovery involves a smooth and rapid progression towards a defined end point where things are presumed to have returned to 'normal' or, better still, to have 'regenerated' to an improved state. Such a model thus leaves no place for the kinds of

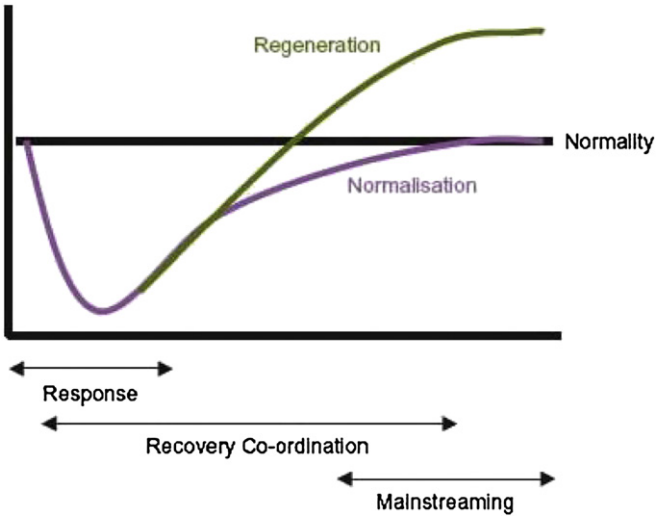

Fig. 1. Recovering from an emergency (from p. 398 of the Pitt Review).

pre-existing vulnerabilities that may act to 'produce' the disaster (Bull-Kamanga et al., 2003; Erikson, 1976, 1994; Pelling, 2003). It also contradicts the disaster studies literature which shows that, far from being a quick, smooth process, recovery is often a protracted, disjointed and frustrating experience with its own 'highs' and 'lows' (Mileti, 1999; Whittle et al., 2010; Wisner et al., 2004). Finally, the model ignores critiques which challenge the idea of recovery as involving a return to 'normal' and which argue instead that recovery must be understood as both relative and contingent:

> The terminology associated with disaster recovery is biased towards optimism. The key words – 'recovery', 're-establish', 'reconstruction', 'restoration' and 'rehabilitation' – are all pre-fixed with 're', indicating a return to the pre-existing situation. A more realistic view challenges the assumption that such recovery will actually be achieved. Instead, the more pessimistic argument suggests there will be uncertainty, unforeseen events and even the reproduction of vulnerability. A rather depressing implication … is that in some cases the most vulnerable households and individuals do not recover (Wisner et al., 2004: 357).

Paradoxically, the model's optimistic view of recovery is also challenged by the more pragmatic approach that exists in government doctrine on UK civil protection. This acknowledges that recovery:

> "…usually takes years rather than months to complete as it seeks to address the enduring human, physical, environmental, and economic consequences of emergencies" (HM Government, 2007: 3).

It is here, in the acknowledgement of the human, the physical, the environmental and the economic impacts, that the Government comes closest to addressing the complex and enduring consequences of long-term disaster recovery. We say 'closest' because the list neglects to mention the emotional experience of disaster recovery. In this paper, we show that an acknowledgement of the emotions and, in particular, emotion work, is essential in order to appreciate the ways in which recovery is experienced by those affected. To set the scene for this task, the following section links the literature on emotions and emotion work with research on disaster recovery.

3. Emotion work and disasters

An extensive literature has developed around the mental health effects of disasters (Brooks and McKinlay, 1992; Freedy and Hobfoll,

[1] There is, to a certain extent, a legal basis to this distinction because the Statutory requirements placed on responders by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 [i.e. what they 'must' do] are focused on emergency preparedness (HM Government, 2005). In contrast, Emergency Response and Recovery (HM Government (2009)) contains only non-statutory 'guidance'. However, research has shown that the ways in which these statutory and non-statutory requirements should be interpreted is, in terms of guiding practice, surprisingly ill defined (Deeming and Easthope, 2010).