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Assessing the effect of the Queensland “Summer of Disasters” on perceptions of collective efficacy



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ABSTRACT

The collective efficacy literature suggests that neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy have fewer problems of disorder, increased volunteerism, and higher levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing, along with the increased potential for resilience in the face of a disaster. Although perceptions of collective efficacy typically remain stable over time, rapid or sudden social change, such as experiencing a natural disaster, has the potential to disrupt the neighborhood and the individuals within – including their perceptions of the regulatory mechanisms of collective efficacy. Still, the effect of a major disaster on *perceptions* of collective efficacy remains relatively unexamined. Longitudinal survey data collected before and after the Queensland flood and cyclone disasters permit a unique investigation of the impact of the disaster on perceptions of social control and social cohesion before and after the disaster. Results show that after this major natural disaster, respondents who were proximately affected reported decreased levels of collective efficacy. Also, persons who experienced the biggest decrease in perceived collective efficacy were those that had lower levels of collective efficacy prior to the disaster. We discuss the mechanisms surrounding disaster preparedness, response, and recovery that may contribute to changing perceptions of collective efficacy.

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1. Introduction

Collective efficacy is defined as the willingness of neighborhood residents to intervene when problems arise (Sampson et al., 1997). At the individual, perceptual level, it is the perceived cohesiveness and the perceived level of informal social control among individuals within communities that is most relevant (Sampson et al., 1997). Collective efficacy has a number of benefits for both communities as well as individuals within communities. Criminological and sociological literature suggests that communities¹ with higher levels of collective efficacy tend to have lower rates of victimization and violent crime (Sampson et al., 1997), lower rates of obesity (Browning and Cagney, 2002), and higher rates of life satisfaction among community residents (Adams and Serpe, 2000). Collective efficacy is also thought to enhance resilience for communities in the face of sudden community change such as natural disasters and terrorist events (Norris et al., 2008). Resilience is a concept employed often by policy-makers denoting the capacity to cope when confronted by hardship – to recover and return to normal after contending with some form of often unexpected adversity (Cutter et al., 2008). However, collective efficacy is vulnerable to sudden

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¹ For clarity, the terms “community” and “neighborhood” are used interchangeably.

change. Thus, a major disaster may suddenly alter individual perceptions of collective efficacy and may have implications for immediate recovery and ongoing rebuilding.

The current study explores how the “Summer of Disasters” in Queensland, Australia from December 2010 to January 2011, including a major cyclone, flash flooding and extreme urban flooding, influenced individual perceptions of collective efficacy. The severe weather during this time resulted in destroyed homes and businesses, widespread displacement of rural and urban residents, and motivated a massive cleanup effort on behalf of all Queenslanders (Fraser et al., 2011; Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry, 2011). Just prior to these extreme weather events, longitudinal survey respondents were asked about preparedness for disasters, perceptions of collective efficacy, and perceptions of their community as a whole. A follow-up with these participants six months after these severe weather events took place allows for a unique look at how perceptions of collective efficacy have changed since the floods, and what implications these changes have for individuals.

Such an investigation is important, primarily because the more general sociological literature has not extensively examined the extent to which perceptions of collective efficacy may change over time (Tierney, 2007). Further, there has been even less sociological examination of how these perceptions are influenced by major and sudden changes in the social environment. In addition, the evidence on the effect of disasters on social cohesion from existing disaster research is mixed and not well-understood in the context of a pre/post-disaster design. These shortcomings in the literature are due to a lack of longitudinal data able to measure perceptions over time and which happen to pre- and post-date unique natural events. The following study addresses these shortcomings by exploring the effect of Queensland’s “Summer of Disasters” on perceptions of collective efficacy and the mediating effects of an individual’s social networks, their sense of wellbeing, their perceptions of disorder, and their changes in perceived collective efficacy post disaster. These findings will contribute to the growing literature on the effects of disasters as well as the literature on collective efficacy, particularly in understanding how individual perceptions of collective efficacy change over time and how it can be influenced by a sudden social and environmental disruption.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Corrosive and therapeutic effects of disasters

Prior and current research from the disaster literature has typically distinguished natural disasters from man-made disasters with respect to the effect they have on individuals and communities (Freudenburg, 1997; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976). While natural disasters have been found to have a therapeutic effect on individuals and communities (Cuthbertson and Nigg, 1987; Freudenburg and Jones, 1991), man-made disasters such as the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill (Picou et al., 2004) have a tendency to be corrosive to individuals and communities (Freudenburg, 1997).

According to work by Freudenburg and colleagues (see Freudenburg, 1997; Freudenburg and Jones, 1991), corrosive communities are those that promote self-serving behavior where the focus of disaster recovery is on affixing blame. In these cases, high levels of social cohesion and support are driven by the non-responsiveness of authorities to contribute to recovery as well as attributions of blame between community members (Freudenburg, 1997; Levine, 1982; Picou et al., 2004). The struggle to assign blame is driven by a lack of responsibility from authorities, a denial of harm to the community as a whole and helping behavior in the recovery process is met with suspicion and cynicism. Picou et al. (2004), in their study of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska USA in 1989, found that the litigation process for victims of the spill were particularly harmful to individuals and communities impacted by the man-made disaster. Not only did the litigation process cause mental and physical stress to victims, it promoted the emergence of corrosive communities. These corrosive communities contain individuals with ongoing mental and physical stress in the aftermath of the disaster and increased perceptions of the failure of government to prevent and respond to the disaster (Picou et al., 2004; Ritchie et al., 2012).

Natural disasters, in contrast to the effects of man-made ones, are seen to drive different effects on individuals and the community (Picou and Marshall, 2007; Smith et al., 1986). Natural disasters tend to have a more restorative post-disaster phase than man-made disasters. They include widespread citizen help in recovery, as authorities tend to participate heavily in the recovery process and altruistic volunteers emerge to help in the clean-up effort (Barton, 1969; Freudenburg, 1997; Schorr et al., 1982; Smith et al., 1986). The emergence of therapeutic or altruistic communities in the aftermath of a natural disaster (Cuthbertson and Nigg, 1987; Freudenburg, 1997) aids individuals and communities to recover and restabilize more quickly than their man-made disaster counterparts.

Freudenburg’s (1997) and Barton’s (1969) classification of corrosive and therapeutic communities in the aftermath of a disaster are indicative of an underlying social process that is influenced by the disaster itself and shapes disaster response and resilience. However, disaster research has predominantly focused on the post-disaster phase of recovery and mixed findings exist on how the existing social process of cohesion and informal social control, or collective efficacy, are influenced by the disaster itself. Tierney (2007) and Freudenburg (1997) argue that in order to better understand the effects of all types of disasters on social processes, communities, and individuals, disaster research needs to engage with the sociological literature on collective behavior, social capital and the social structure. Accordingly, the current study engages with the criminological literature on collective efficacy, a combination of perceived social cohesion and informal social control and its individual drivers, to better understand how a natural disaster influences how individuals perceive collective efficacy in their community after a major natural disaster.

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