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# A COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCE OF BUSHFIRE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

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# ABSTRACT

**Introduction**:  This paper documents the research of a community's experience of the 2013 Forcett Tasmania bushfire disaster.

**Background:**  Friday 4 January 2013 was one of the most significant fire days in Tasmania since 1967.  It was the Forcett bushfire that caused the most damage.  During and immediately after the bushfire event some of the small communities were inaccessible due to the hazard and road closures.  Many local people isolated in these small communities impacted by the bushfire fulfilled various roles and acted in response to the evolving individual and community needs.  It appeared over time that much of this energy and focus shifted to accommodating the external response, i.e. donations, help and goodwill.

**Literature:**  There are numerous studies and articles that draw attention to the concept of resilience in disasters.  The disaster management sector recognises the critical role that community members play in the disaster management process, nevertheless in practice it has been problematic.

**Research inquiry:**  This study aims to understand a community's experience of the 2013 Forcett bushfire disaster in southeast Tasmania.  Constructivist grounded theory offered a practical method to gain insight into understanding the local processes.  The research investigated: what happened; how community members approached the event and what they thought was important; and what supported or hindered their involvement.  The study aims to communicate rich insights into the community's experience of a bushfire disaster to assist in refining ways of working with people, groups and communities impacted by these types of hazard events.

**Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC project**:  This study is linked to the 'Out of Uniform building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering' project.

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# INTRODUCTION

Irrespective of the best intentions in a disaster the need or problem will be greater than, or will exceed, the ability of the community to respond and resource the impact of the event. Wisner et al. (2004) claim it would be naïve to think that local coping will suffice in hazards and disaster, that there is no need for external support and assistance, or that it is the single best response. However, quite often, many people experiencing hazards and disaster events will self-organise and draw on their individual capabilities, capacity and available resources to approach the circumstances to the best of their ability.

This paper introduces a study seeking to understand a community's experience of the 2013 Forcett Tasmania bushfire disaster. The background describes the bushfire disaster and the author's experiential knowledge. The brief literature review emphasises the significance of this research, followed by the research purpose and the merit of a constructivist grounded theory methodology that suited this type of inquiry. Finally, a brief account of the findings to date is provided and a conclusion. Maintaining the parameters and keeping in line with the ethos of constructive grounded theory, writing in first person acknowledges my presence in the research process and the co-construction of knowledge.

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# BACKGROUND

Friday 4 January 2013 was one of the most significant fire days in Tasmania since 1967 with numerous fires burning. Among these were fires in the Forcett, Lake Repulse and Bicheno areas. The Forcett fire caused the greatest damage, burning 20,165 hectares and destroying 193 dwellings. 186 other buildings were also destroyed or damaged (Boylan et al., 2013). Fortunately, there were no deaths attributed to the fire. However, the catastrophic fire conditions impacted significantly on people's lives. Although many people had survived a life-threatening experience, they endured varying degrees of injury, trauma, and loss. The Tasmanian Ambulance Service recorded one of its busiest days on record (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2013).

During and immediately after the bushfire event many of the small communities were inaccessible due to the hazard and road closures. Many of those residents who remained in the fire impact zone fulfilled various roles and undertook a range of activities. There were stories of amazing feats, acts of courage and demonstrated resilience. It became evident that people who lived in these communities, had a diverse range of skills, extensive knowledge and a broad base of experience that they were able to pull together and direct to the common benefit. For example, isolated with the fire still burning, local people located a barbeque and then fed over one hundred people. Over the next five days, the hotel kitchen provided three meals daily to local people and visitors stranded in the area, mainly driven by local people women with experience in hospitality. Residents who still had dwellings accommodated neighbours, friends and relatives who had lost their homes.

The fire threatened life and left a trail of destruction, however in spite of this a level of social structure and processes were evident. Over time, much of this energy and focus shifted to accommodating the influx of external donations, help and offers of goodwill. The external response also brought structures, systems, and activities that often conflicted with the community's experience and some residents felt undervalued and excluded from decision making.

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# LITERATURE

There have been numerous studies and articles that draw attention to the efforts of local people who demonstrate the ability to draw upon local resources, norms and values, roles and relationships and organise themselves during the different phases of disaster management (Camilleri et al., 2007, Cox and Elah Perry, 2011, Lindell, 2013, Marsh et al., 2004, Orange County Fire Authority, 2007, Proudley, 2013, Pupavac, 2012, Webber and Jones, 2012, Wisner et al., 2004).

People impacted by disaster can experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness which can often result in trauma. It is therefore important that people living and coping in an emergency and/or disaster are recognised and where possible interventions should emphasise empowerment (Harvey 1996, cited in Norris et al., 2008, p.143 in Australian Emergency Institute, 2011, p.26).

In Australia, people living in communities impacted by a disaster have in the aftermath claimed that the pre-existing formal and informal local processes were often not acknowledged (Taylor and Goodman, 2014) or the reservoir "of skills, expertise and energy were not sufficiently tapped into by some institutions" (Camilleri et al., 2007, p.169).

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# RESEARCH INQUIRY

The aim of the study is to understand a community's experience of a bushfire disaster. To develop an understanding of local processes, what happened, how community members approached the event, and why, the importance and\or meaning and what supported or hindered their involvement. This understanding aims to assist in refining ways of working with people, groups and communities impacted by these types of hazard events.

Grounded theory offered a practical method that shifted away from testing theory. It creates an opportunity to generate theory and gain fresh insights into how people (social actors) interpret their reality (Suddaby, 2006). Grounded theory has the potential to illuminate common issues by providing opportunities that allow people to associate with the knowledge or theory around those issues and then apply it to daily life (Mills et al., 2006). A constructivist grounded theory method is a systematic approach to inquiry. It is achieved through data generation and analysis that is both inductive and abductive qualitative research. A feature of grounded theory is that it studies process, the 'what' and 'how' questions that often give reason or answer to the 'why' questions. Participants' views and voices are a fundamental and represented throughout the analysis. It assumes that there are multiple realities, these are an interpretive understanding with subjectivities acknowledged throughout the analysis. A reflexive stance recognises my influence as a researcher, it requires me to turn the lens back on myself to examine and account for decision making and actions that influenced this enquiry (Charmaz, 2014).

The study is situated in southeast Tasmania. The 40 people participating in this study were residents of the small communities impacted by the bushfire disaster, external support volunteers, representatives of local and state government and non-government services. In August and October 2015, I carried out two field trips to Tasmania, and conducted 27 interviews.

The sensitising concept of community-led recovery was considered a tentative tool to assist with data generation and the initial analysis, a starting point. The 27 audio interviews were transcribed, followed by line by line coding 6 transcripts. The initial coding interrogated the data looking for new ideas using gerunds, nouns 'ing' words that foster theoretical sensitivity. For example, *comprehending* the severity, *remaining* blasé, *locating* family and *stepping* up. A valuable tool that nudged my attention away from the participant's, topics, themes and structures to focus on actions and processes, and assist in developing an analytical sense of what was happening. The 6 transcripts produced approximately 4,000 initial codes. The second major phase involved focused coding where the most significant, frequent and analytical codes were elevated, tested and scrutinized, resulting in 784 focused codes. I worked with these codes constantly comparing, making links, looking for patterns, gaps and constructing tentative categories. The focused codes in the tentative categories were then used to comb through the remainder of the transcripts, looking for properties that illustrated analytical points, gaps and to saturate subcategories. Memo writing stimulated the theoretical sampling, and was essential in analyzing ideas and data, constructing categories and identifying relationships between categories (Charmaz, 2014).

The developing theory suggests a core category that encompasses three subcategories representing phases in a community's experience of a bushfire

disaster. The community's experience was the journey, and individual values and actions influenced, motivated or directed people on that journey.

The three sub-categories that represent these phases are LOSING THE FAMILIAR, RESTORING THE FAMILIAR and LIVING WITH CHANGE. The sub-category LOSING THE FAMILIAR contains four properties that help define it. KNOWING ABOUT THE FIRE marked the beginning of this phase and involved the following actions and processes: acting blasé or thinking the fire was not a threat, knowing about the fire and paying attention, predicting a bad fire or having a sense of intuition, monitoring the fire, planning, preparing, and making the decision to stay or go.

For example, as the intensity and threat increased, subsequently so did the level of monitoring, including listening to the radio and tapping into customary networks. People were considering the warning signs and information, analyzing this information, consulting with others, planning actions and responding. KNOWING ABOUT THE FIRE and COMPREHENDING THE GRAVITY of what was happening influenced varying decision making and actions in SAFEGUARDING RESPONSIBILITY'S largely concentrated toward the safeguarding of people, animals and place. The fourth property in this category is LOCATING FAMILY AND OTHERS. This subcategory helps understand what was happening and the differing decision making, actions, relationships, capabilities and capacity that participants relied on during this phase.

These phases are an interpretive view of the participant's reality gained through a method of interacting with people, learning about their experiences and perspectives, combined with a research practice where data is scrutinized in a manner that preserved the evidence of the analytical ideas and identified actions (Charmaz, 2014).

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# CONCLUSION

Living in Australia people are often faced with the prospect of being exposed to a range of natural hazards, like bushfire, flood, cyclones and severe weather events. Hazards have the potential to cause loss of life or injury, destroy and significantly damage property, infrastructure and the environment. This study suggests that some people experiencing these types of events will self organise, work with others to problem-solve with greater commitment, along with a convincing sense of self-sacrifice and values concentrated toward the good of the community. Although it is important to have a clear definition of resilience in the context of disaster policy, it is far more valuable to focus on some of its common characteristics, like functioning well under stress, self-reliance, social capacity, and successful adaption (National Emergency Management Committee, 2011:5 in Reid & Botterill, 2013). This research concludes that it is necessary to consider the possibilities of people functioning under stress in hazards and disaster, and develop approaches that value and support their participation in a way that is meaningful and respectful of their experience.

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