

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Disaster experience in the context of life: Perspectives five to six years after the 2003 Canberra Bushfire

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Abstract

Objectives

To gain deeper understanding of the long-term lived experiences of adults affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfire, approximately five to six years after the disaster.

Method

We present an overview of themes that emerged from thematic analysis of transcripts of in-depth semi-structured interviews of 25 adults directly affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfire interviewed from April 2008 to March 2009. Coincidentally, six of these participants were interviewed following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires and, where relevant, this is noted.

Results

The overarching themes that emerged were sensory memory from the day of the fires, emotions, relationships, and other life events. Participants reported an extraordinary sensory experience. They also reported and demonstrated mixed emotions over five years after the incident, such as fear, grief and anger, intertwined with gratitude and a sense of achievement. The disaster experience bonded some relationships, strained others, and often simultaneously supported and caused difficulties in close relationships. In terms of other life events, participants gauged the impact of the fires in relation to other significant personal life events before or after the fire. A few reported a sense of having to face a series of hardships; however, others reported that experiencing other hardships put the bushfires in perspective. Those interviewed following the 2009 Victorian bushfires also presented an interplay between emotions relating to their own experience and their thoughts and feelings relating to the more recent bushfire in Victoria.

Conclusions

Findings highlighted how the subjective experiences, perceived supportive and unsupportive factors, and meaning-making of people affected by disaster are embedded in the context of their lives in a dynamic and multi-dimensional way.

People's thoughts and feelings cannot be solely attributed to the disaster in question, and arguably it would not be relevant to do so, as disasters always occur in the context of people's lives. Other life events not only add to the disaster experience, but the various life events can become lenses in which other life events are perceived, experienced, and processed. Grief, loss, fear, anxiety, and guilt can be intertwined with, and thus balanced by, a sense of gratitude and achievement. The role of life events and other factors such as relationships, thus cannot be simply categorised as supportive or risk factors. Subsequent disasters act as painful reminders of one's own experiences, but can also provide an opportunity to work through and relate to them as one who has gone through a similar experience and survived several years down the track.

Keywords: *bushfire; Canberra; disaster; qualitative; Victoria*

Introduction

In January 2003, lightning strikes, intense heat and extremely low humidity caused several bushfires in and around the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).¹⁻³ On January 18th, the fires merged into a massive fire wall, reaching several suburbs- causing damage to 1,600 houses and completely destroying 488.¹⁻³ Four people died, three suffered serious burn injuries, 49 were hospitalised, and 440 sought outpatient care.¹⁻³ Over 5,000 people evacuated to emergency centres, and many more evacuated to friends, family, or other accommodation, such as motels.¹⁻³ Ongoing controversy surrounds the inquiry and government response to the incident (e.g. 4). In 2009, a major bushfire occurred in Victoria, bringing attention back to the 2003 Canberra bushfires.

The majority of disaster research to date, focuses on the consequences of disaster on individuals,^{5,6} for example, post traumatic stress disorder, associated risk and protective factors, such as level of exposure, socioeconomic status, or psychosocial resources.⁷ While a growing number of studies look at positive adjustment, such as coping,⁸ post traumatic growth,⁹ and resilience,¹⁰ people's lived experiences often do not fit neatly into predefined categories. For example, a number of conditions, such as prior exposure to disasters, have been found to either increase or reduce risk, depending on context.⁶ In order to shed more light on context-dependent conditions such as other life events, there is a need for further research that looks more closely into how survivors themselves perceive their lived experiences of dealing with disasters and the interplay between dealing with disasters and other aspects of their lives.

This research aims to gain deeper understanding of the long-term lived experiences of adults affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfire, approximately five to six years after the disaster. The paper focuses on the survivor's subjective perspectives of their experiences, what they felt helped them take action for survival and recovery, and how they made meaning out of their experiences five to six years down the track within the context of their lives.

Method

This paper presents an overview of findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews of 25 adults directly affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfire interviewed in April 2008- March 2009. Interviews conducted by the first author collected retrospective accounts of people's actions, thoughts and feelings, and their sense of strength in facing the fire and related challenges. The participants were asked to narrate their experience of the bushfire and the aftermath using the main interview questions of "Can you tell me about your experience during the Canberra bushfire?" and "Can you tell me about your experience following the

Canberra bushfire?", with other questions arising from the interview process, such as, "How did you feel when...?" and probes such as "Can you tell me more about..." to elicit more detail when necessary. The study received approval from the Australian National University (ANU) Human Research Ethics Committee.

Male and female participants, including four couples, aged 30-73, from a range of occupations, were recruited using a combination of convenience, chain and purposive sampling.¹¹ Nineteen were married; twenty three had children; twenty had tertiary level education; one had primary-level education. Twenty-three were from middle to upper class. Twenty-four were of Anglo-Celtic or other European background. One participant lost a loved one, and sixteen lost their homes. The others had to evacuate, were trapped, or fought the fires.

During the course of the study, the 2009 "Black Saturday" Victorian Bushfires occurred. Coincidentally, six of the participants were interviewed within days to weeks of the Victorian fires. While questions were not specifically asked in relation to the Victorian fires, spontaneous references to them were noted and this more recent disaster is factored in the analysis of themes that emerged from these six participants.

Following informed consent, interviews (1-2 hours) were recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked against recall and notes for accuracy, body language, and context. Using NVivo software, the transcripts were coded and analysed thematically as outlined by Braun and Clarke¹² where the data is recursively described, compared, and related within context to one another and to references¹³ in writing and by using matrices and models.¹⁴ To ensure trustworthiness, careful attention was made to credibility, dependability, and transferability, such as by keeping an audit trail,¹⁵ checking for alternative interpretations,¹³ and using methods triangulation¹¹ by checking the consistency of findings with those generated by different data collection methods.²

Results

In this paper we report an overview of the overarching themes that emerged from the interview, which consisted of:

- sensory memory from the day of the fires,
- emotions
- relationships, and
- other life events

Extraordinary sensory memory

Approximately six years on, participants who were there during the fires (two were not in Canberra on the day – one had lost a loved one, and both lost their home/family home) were able to recall the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations that day with incredible detail and emotion. With expressive voice and body language, participants spoke of "fire raining down from the sky in the middle of nightfall at 3 o'clock in the afternoon", winds that sounded like jet engines, bright red orange glows, intense heat and dryness, burnt smell and feeling like they were in a "war zone". One participant spoke of standing stunned by the beauty of the red glow above the burning tree line across the street, while another participant who was caught in the extremely bright eye of the firestorm described it as, a "very extraordinary almost supernatural sensory experience".

Mixed emotions

While the realisation of the magnitude and force of nature at hand was reported to be frightening, participants also expressed awe or amazement. All participants expressed such mix of emotions in relation to the experiences during and following the bushfires, such as fear, anxiety, grief, loss, guilt, anger and disappointment, as well as awe, relief, amusement, gratitude and a sense of achievement. Participants reported both fear and relief that they or loved ones are alive. They also expressed a sense of grief or loss – for loved ones, the lives they had before, having to restart their lives and re-establish their sense of identity, items that held memories, hard work gone to waste, or things often taken for granted in life. Three participants reported feeling guilt, regret, or defeat for not having been able to do more that day. Accustomed to feeling independent, five participants reported having difficulties acknowledging need and accepting help. Eight participants felt that the bushfires “should not have happened” and remained angry at the government for past and current bushfire management. Four participants were disturbed by other people’s anger about the fires. At the same time, all participants presented some positive emotions. While being interviewed, all but one participant laughed at the ironies they encountered. There was overwhelming gratitude for remaining alive, and for the generosity and support of family, friends, institutions, and strangers. Fifteen participants reported a good feeling of having overcome the fires, such as by rebuilding or by not allowing the fires to crush their spirits. Participants particularly reported feeling good when they felt able to assist others.

Participants reported an ebb and flow of these emotions, both spontaneously or activated by reminders, such as recent bushfires. Five participants recalled having spontaneously burst out crying many months or years after the incident, when on errands, listening to a song, or meeting a caring person. This resulted in embarrassment as well as relief from having held back intense emotions. Twelve participants became teary during the interview, in expression of various things, such as loss, hurt, relief, or being touched by people’s kindness. Five of them apologised for crying during the interview, two adding that they were disappointed at themselves for not being able to hold back their emotions.

Interplay of relationships

Six participants found having a professional relationship (counselling) to be helpful; while one found it unhelpful. Seven participants were uncomfortable with seeking counselling, preferring informal support from family and friends. Connections with family, friends, community, and institutions appear to strongly influence how the participants felt. Participants reported gaining strength from strong, supportive relationships, and were disturbed by relationships that became distant or discordant. The disaster experience bonded some relationships, strained others, and often simultaneously supported and caused difficulties in close relationships, such as when participants had to manage the consequences of the disaster on their own, as well as their loved ones.

Five participants reported never really discussing their emotions related to the fires, putting them aside to focus on other people or specific tasks, or feeling that nobody really asked and listened. The response of family, friends, community members and institutions appeared to lead to gratitude or disappointment, depending on how much was expected from them compared to the perceived emotional resonance, concern, support, or social envy received. As one participant said, “I think some people become envious because you’ve got a new house... they judge you on the new house.”

The impact of other bushfires

In general, participants who were interviewed prior to the 2009 Victorian bushfires appeared to recall their experience of the 2003 Canberra bushfires with as much detail and emotion

compared to participants who were interviewed after the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Having said that, participants who were interviewed following the 2009 Victorian bushfires stated that the 2009 Victorian bushfires served as an important reminder. There was one report of new nightmares. Two of the six participants interviewed following the Victorian fires reported feeling very unsettled when faced with news surrounding the Victorian bushfires, particularly when they deeply identified with the story of particular persons. The more recent bushfires moved the six participants to share resurfaced thoughts and feelings with other people affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfires. The participants also reported a deep sense of empathy towards people affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, as participants could relate to the experience firsthand, and at the same time feel sorry for the greater extent of devastation. By the time of the interview, four out of the six participants interviewed following the 2009 Victorian bushfires had taken steps to reach out to help those affected in Victoria. The other two were interviewed just two days afterwards, so it is uncertain whether they made efforts later on. One of the four who made efforts to help mentioned how helping people affected by the bushfires in Victoria had also helped them to work through their own experience.

Other life adversities

Eighteen participants spontaneously reported other significant adverse life events before or after the fire, such as the death of a loved one, life-threatening illness or injury of self or loved one, separations, other natural disasters (including previous bushfires) or war. Participants gauged the impact of the fires in relation to these other significant life events. Five participants who suffered other difficulties close to the time of the fires reported a sense of struggling with a series of hardships. As one said, “It was like just a whole series of attacks on our stability”. On the other hand, for four participants, other adverse events following the fires “brought the fires into perspective”. Seven participants reported that having faced difficulties in childhood made them stronger, even though three of them also reported that it simultaneously gave them more issues to deal with.

Positive life events after adversity

All participants reported one or more positive life events arising from the fires or achieved despite the fires. In the months to years that followed, there were participants who built houses, were promoted at work, opened businesses, organised community action, developed award-winning gardens, won sports championships, and volunteered to help others. Participants who reported feeling good about themselves in relation to these positive events appear to convey greater acceptance of adversity as a multidimensional part of life and identity. As one participant reported,

“You know, things change. Things get better or you know, time passes, you learn, you know. But I don’t ever – I’ll never ever – I’ll never ever forget the fire, but I’ll never ever forget any of the bad things that have ever happened to me. They make me who I am. They’re where I’ve been and what I’ve experienced.”

Discussion and conclusion

Many of the memories, emotions and relational issues presented in this paper appear to be similar to those reported three years following the 2003 incident.² This highlights how dealing with disasters can be a continuous journey for some, as found among children impacted by the Ash Wednesday bushfires.¹⁶ Similarly, our study highlighted how the experiences of people affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfires are complex and multi-dimensional, and how these experiences interplay with other life events and factors in a multi-faceted and dynamic way.

It is difficult to attribute people's mental and emotional processes to a specific disaster, and arguably not relevant to do so, as people perceive their experiences in the context of their whole lives. The study of 860 people impacted by the Ash Wednesday bushfires in childhood, found participants to have experienced a range of other adversities aside from the bushfires.¹⁶ When reviewing the effect of factors surrounding the incident,¹⁷ other adverse life events are generally categorised as risk factors^{18,19} or vulnerabilities,¹⁷ while factors such as supportive relationships and high expectations are considered resources.⁷ Different aspects of people's life experiences, however, intertwine in a complex web of meaning that cannot always be easily categorised. For example, some participants reported having gained strength when losing a parent at an early age, while another who lost a parent following the fires reported feeling relieved of the burden of care-giving, which then induced a sense of guilt. Similarly, relationships can be simultaneously supportive and problematic, and as Norris, Friedman, Watson, Byrne, Diaz and Kaniasty⁶ presented in previous findings, within the context of relationships, protective and risk factors are not mutually exclusive.

A sense of gratitude and achievement appear to be important positive factors that balance grief, loss, fear, anxiety, and guilt. While negative change of identity and life centred upon adversity have been correlated with trauma,²⁰ meaning-making²¹ appears to involve the opposite – i.e. integration of adversity into a generally positive sense of identity and life narrative. Being able to assist others was experienced positively, in line with Staub and Vollhardt's awarded argument²² of the positive feedback loop between healing and altruism born of suffering. Thus, while other adversities such as the 2009 Victorian bushfires served as painful reminders for those affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfires, some people took the opportunity to relate and assist, based on their own firsthand experience, which in turn enhances the creation of positive meaning out of adversity.²³

Some participants presented discomfort in expressing the fullness of their emotions, fearing other people's reactions. Culturally, tears may be perceived as a sign of weakness and something inappropriate to share, rather than a natural process of expressing hurt, releasing tension or feeling touched. This may make it difficult for people affected by disaster, who often experience strong emotions. A sense of having to hold back tears and strong emotions in the presence of others may create a sense of isolation or distance between people affected by disasters and the broader community. Similarly, people affected by disasters may also find it difficult to fully express the positive aspects of their experience without the fear of losing needed support, or facing social envy. Efforts are thus needed to create a sense of public "emotional safety" by enhancing sensitivity and empathy from the broader community and those who were not directly affected by disasters.

These findings highlight how research and services need to carefully consider the complexity of the experiences of people affected by disasters, to explore the person's multi-faceted and dynamic appraisals of life events and circumstances, and to be cautious when attributing particular factors as risk or supportive factors. Most importantly, research, services, media, policy, and the general public need to take into account that while a disaster is an important critical incident to deal with, it is one of many experiences in a person's life.²⁴ Support is thus needed not just to help people deal with the immediate and ongoing issues related with disaster, but in the process of salutogenesis – the creation of health²⁵ by encouraging and supporting attainment of what the people would like to achieve in life as a whole.

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