RESEARCHING IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON INFORMATION FLOW IN FIRE-RISK COMMUNITIES:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FRAMEWORK FOR A PHD PROJECT

Sondra Dickinson

Department of Anthropology, University of Melbourne, Victoria; Bushfire CRC

Presentation Agenda

This PhD research project will analyse the use of social networks within fire-risk communities, to better understand how information about bushfires and relevant risk is transferred and utilized.

Presentation Elements:

1. Research Area, Relevance and Literature Review

2. Project Design and Fieldwork Methodology

3. Fieldwork Progress Report

4. Next Steps and Concluding Remarks

Research Area, Relevance and Literature Review

bushfire CRC

Research Area:

1. Conducted within the discipline of Anthropology

2. "Social Network" should not to be confused with "Social Media"

3. Recognizes that Social Media can be used as a tool for maintaining and establishing connections within social networks, and will therefore be included in the research from that perspective (where applicable)

bushfire CRC

Relevance:

1. Conducted in the context of fire-risk, rather than undertaken as the result of a bushfire event

2. Ethnography allows the researcher to understand social networks through a "lived" experience

bushfire CRC

Modernity and Risk Society

1. Individuals are experiencing increased risks as a result of "modern" environments and lifestyles (Caplan 2000; Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002; Blaikie et al. 1994)

2. Capacities to recognize and understand the overwhelming presence of risks are being exceeded (Beck et al. 1994; Rifkin 2000; Caplan 2000)

Research Area, Relevance and Literature Review

"Abdication of Responsibility"

1. Individuals turn off capacities to recognize and react to certain risk, instead entrusting those responsibilities to authorities and experts (Hassan 2004; Rifkin 2000; see also Douglas & Wildavsky 1983; Clarke & Short 1993)

2. Not a negative/judgmental statement, but a reflection on the increasing number of general and "extreme" risks which must be persistently prioritized and addressed

3. Relieves "modern" individuals of exigent responsibility, allowing the flexibility to focus on other, more immediately critical risk in their own daily lives (Caplan 2000; Hoffman & Oliver-Smith 2002; see also Tompkins & Adger 2004; Pelling 2003)

4. Far outweighs the capacities of authorities and experts to successfully manage or eradicate all risk(s) (Hassan 2004)

Role of Social Networks

1. Management of stressors induced by crises can be achieved through feedback and support from a social community
   (Bonanno et al. 2001; Smit & Wandel 2006; see also Tompkins & Adger 2004)

2. Individuals who engage with others often display better levels of control, confidence and self-sufficiency during crises (Bonanno et al. 2001; see also Thompson et al. 1990; Knox et al. 2006)

Research Area, Relevance and Literature Review

Transaction Theory and Social Capital Theory

1. Relationships are assets that can be leveraged (Mitchell 1974; Putnam & Goss 2002; Woolcock 2001; 2009; see also Freeman et al. 1989)

Strength of Ties

1. shared common knowledge and experiences establish the strongest connections between people (Bourdieu 1990)

2. Strong ties can in some cases reinforce, and often perpetuate actions or ideas that may not consistently provide beneficial returns (Bourdieu 1990; Granovetter 1973; Mitchell 1974)

3. Weak ties provide alternate information flow outlets and are often recognized more frequently than strong ties (Bourdieu 1990; Mitchell 1974; see also Strathern 2001; Woolcock 2001)

Research Design and Methodology

Component 1

Pilot study designed to introduce the student researcher to Victorian fire authority and land management agency philosophies, protocols, and practices

Component 2

12-month comparative ethnography undertaken in two Victorian fire-risk communities

– identified from the 52 Victorian towns most at-risk of bushfire (2009)

Component 3

Analysis, write up and submission of thesis

Fieldwork Methodology

1. Selection of two "at-risk" regions in Victoria

2. Exclusion of recently fire-affected communities

3. Allows for the assumption that awareness, interest and sensitivities are heightened, but have not yet been challenged by recent exposure to bushfire

4. Fire is often experienced in both the historical and social memory, and therefore cannot be entirely excluded from the research communities

Fieldwork Progress Report: Site 1

Otway Coast Region, VIC (semi-rural/destination site)

- Kennett River, Wye River, Separation Creek
- Commenced August 2010; Completed February 2011

Participant Base

- Volunteer CFA Brigade members
- Volunteer CFA Auxiliary members
- CFA Staff
- CFA Community Safety Officers
- Council Representatives
- Tradesmen

- Business Owners/Operators
- Permanent Residents
- Holiday-Home Owners
- Seasonal Residents
- Frequent-Tourists
- First-Time Tourists

Specific research findings cannot be discussed until full data analysis has been conducted

Fieldwork Progress Report: Site 2

Dandenong Ranges Region, VIC (urban-fringe/dormitory suburb)

- Kallista, The Patch, Sassafras
- Commenced March 2011; Completed August 2011

Participant Base

- Volunteer CFA Brigade members
- Parks Victoria Staff members
- Victoria Police Staff members
- CFA Community Safety Officers
- Tradesmen

- Business Owners/Operators
- Permanent Residents
- Renters
- Council Representatives
- Tourists

Specific research findings cannot be discussed until full data analysis has been conducted

Next Steps and Concluding Remarks

Next Steps:

1. Data Analysis (4-6 months)
2. Thesis Write-Up and Submission

Concluding Remarks:

By exploring how social networks are used to transfer and utilize relevant information, this project intends to consider how informative relationships may carry the potential to be leveraged differently, by adjusting how individuals think about their social networks.

THANK YOU!

References

Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash. *Reflexive Modernization : Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1994.

Blaikie, Piers, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, and Ben Wisner. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.

Bonanno, George A. "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events?" *The American Psychologist* 59, no. 1 (2004): 20-28.

Bonanno, George A., Anthony Papa, and Kathleen O'Neill. "Loss and Human Resilience." *Applied and Preventive Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2001): 193-206.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.

Caplan, Pat, ed. *Risk Revisited*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.

Clarke, Lee, and James F. Short, Jr. "Social Organization and Risk: Some Current Controversies." *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993): 375-99.

Douglas, Mary, and Aaron Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

References

Freeman, Linton C. *The Development of Social Network Analysis : A Study in the Sociology of Science*. North Charleston, South Carolina: BookSurge, LLC, 2004.

Granovetter, Mark S. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *The American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360-80.

Hassan, Robert. *Media, Politics and the Network Society*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004.

Hoffman, Susanna, and Anthony Oliver-Smith. *Catastrophe & Culture : The Anthropology of Disaster*, *School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series.* Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2002.

Knox, Hannah, Mike Savage, and Penny Harvey. "Social Networks and the Study of Relations: Networks as Method, Metaphor and Form." *Economy and Society* 35, no. 1 (2006): 113-40.

Mitchell, J. Clyde. "Social Networks." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3 (1974): 279-99.

Pelling, Mark. *The Vulnerability of Cities : Natural Disasters and Social Resilience*. Sterling, Va. : Earthscan Publications, 2003.

References

Putnam, Robert D., and Kristin A. Goss, eds. *Democracies in Flux. The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society.* New York Oxford University Press, 2002.

Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Age of Access : How the Shift from Ownership to Access Is Transforming Modern Life*. London Penguin, 2000.

Smit, Barry, and Johanna Wandel. "Adaptation, Adaptive Capacity and Vulnerability." *Global Environmental Change* 16, no. 3 (2006): 282-92.

Strathern, Marilyn. "Cutting the Network." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 3 (1996): 517.

Thompson, Michael, Richard Ellis , and Aaron Wildavsky. *Cultural Theory*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990.

Tompkins, E. L., and W. N. Adger. "Does Adaptive Management of Natural Resources Enhance Resilience to Climate Change?" *Ecology and Society* 9, no. 2 (2004).

Woolcock, Michael. "Social Capital and Economic Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework." *Theory and Society* 27 (1998): 151-208.

———. "The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes." In *ISUMA*, 11-17, 2001.

CONTACT DETAILS:

Sondra Dickinson, PhD Candidate

University of Melbourne, Victoria

Bushfire CRC

s.dickinson2@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au