

Disasters and older adults

Case studies of vulnerability and resilience

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Outline of presentation

- Disasters are social phenomena
- Narrative as a research method
- Results:
 - 'Biographical integration' - flood linked to personal life experiences
 - Narrative themes around personal and social vulnerability
- Implications for practice and future research
- Summary

Disasters are social phenomena

- It is important to understand existing social conditions of individuals and communities
 - these conditions will affect disaster outcomes and recovery
- Older adults can become a vulnerable population group in a disaster
 - age and social conditions create personal and social vulnerability

Narrative as a research method

- Narrative allows rich details and meanings about events and experiences to be expressed
- Events and action within the story can be ordered and interpreted.
- Narrative can be used to look at layers of meaning at a personal level, and to understand how these stories link to the wider cultural context.

Study participants

- Interviews were conducted with 9 older adults over the age of 65 years, who were evacuated from the Kaitaia flood disaster in July 2007.
- Study participants included 4 from a rest home and 5 from rental flats in the community.

The flood narratives were biographically integrated

- The flood event was expressed in a biographical context and showed older adults' resilience to the flood event
- Revealed accounts of identity
 - Rest Home residents expressed dependency and frailty
 - The older adults who lived independently expressed independence and self-reliance
- Revealed connection between personal and dominant socio-cultural narratives

Personal and social vulnerability

Rest Home residents

- Personal vulnerability was reflected in the narrative themes:
 - Care and protection
 - Trust
- Social vulnerability was recognised by the wider community
 - Their rest home environment, and social relationships enabled appropriate social support to be given
 - They were a visible group in the community

Social vulnerability environmental



Social vulnerability

Independently-living adult group

- Social inequalities
 - Flood prone location
- Social connectedness
 - Limited warning time
- Socio-cultural influences and ageing
 - Positive ageing
 - Ageing in place

Themes

- Coping with limited assistance
- Loss of treasured possessions
- Social support and community



Coping with limited assistance

“I went out the back door and just about got bowled over with water”

“Well it was dark, somehow I got the creeps, I could almost feel the water running down the back of my neck”

Treasured possessions

- can provide a sense of self identity, attachment, and wellbeing
- have a transferability - meanings remain even if place where one lives has changed
- symbolise an ongoing connection with the past, and a sense of continuity throughout a person's lifespan

Reference: Kamptner, L. (1989). Personal possessions and their meanings in old age. In S. Spacapan & S. Oscamp (Eds.). *The social psychology of ageing*.

Social support and community

- Social support:
 - is a major source of coping through the presence of social ties which can promote resilience
 - plays an important role in minimising perceived stress
- The independent group of older adults in this study received social support in the post disaster phase:
 - They received material, practical and informational support from welfare organisations, friends, and family

Social support in the recovery phase

- Accommodation assistance
- Financial assistance
- Flood victim dinners, Drop-In group
- Post-flood social outings organised by the older adults flooded from the rental flats
- Information and advice
 - Advocacy re: insurance claims, power bills

Implications for practice and future research

- Independent older adults are at risk of becoming socially vulnerable in a disaster
 - Develop a database that would enable easy identification of vulnerable older adults in the community
 - Undertake environmental assessment to identify risks for older people
- Older adults are resilient by nature of their life experiences and capabilities
 - Promote strategies that focus on self-preparation through education
 - Involve older adults in disaster planning and preparedness

Implications for practice and research

- Improve emergency preparation and education to ensure treasured items are safe
 - Pay attention to improving decontamination procedures for photographs and important items
 - Research the role of treasured items and relocation adjustments post disaster
- Social support requires a long-term commitment to promote recovery and wellbeing after a disaster
 - Research into how state and voluntary agencies would coordinate support for older adults

Summary

- Narrative research was used to explore older adults experiences of a disaster
- The research identified a need to address pre-event social conditions to improve outcomes (e.g. social connectedness)
- Older adults are both vulnerable and resilient
- Older adults have a role in community preparation and recovery from a disaster