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Displaced twice? Talking about resilience with a cohort of men from refugee backgrounds who were affected by the 2011 Queensland floods

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What can we learn from people from refugee backgrounds who have been affected by an environmental disaster? This paper presents the first year findings of a study that is investigating the impact of the 2011 Queensland floods on a cohort of men from refugee backgrounds living in Brisbane and the Toowoomba–Gatton region of Southeast Queensland. Between 2008 and 2010, the SettleMEN study yielded pre-disaster measures of health and settlement among 233 refugee men. The current 2012–2013 follow-up study offers a rare opportunity to investigate and describe the impact of an environmental disaster on the health and wellbeing of a group of resettled refugee men who were affected by the 2011 Queensland floods.

Using a mixed-method approach and a peer interviewer model, this paper reports on the exposure to and impact of the floods on the first 100 respondents who were interviewed between September 2012 and March 2013. Overall, we have found that the floods had a considerable economic and psychosocial impact on this group of men, their families and communities in terms of being forced to evacuate their homes, work disruption, loss of income and personal belongings, and emotional distress. Many of these men reported that their previous refugee experience helped them to cope better during and after the floods, and for some, providing assistance to others during the floods impacted positively on their relationship with their neighbours. These findings challenge the Western deficits model that defines former refugees as traumatised victims. Refugee people's strengths and capabilities should be taken into consideration when developing disaster response strategies at the neighbourhood and community levels.

Key Words : *Humanitarian refugees, resilience, coping, floods, natural disaster, social capital*

INTRODUCTION

War, violence, political and social exclusion, physical and emotional trauma constitute a vivid picture of the refugee experience.¹ The 1951 UN Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who “owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [her] nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail him[her]self of the protection of that country”.² In the year 2010–2011, 13,799 refugee and humanitarian visas were granted by the Australian government, and this number is expected to increase to 20,000 in the year 2012–2013.³ Over the last five years, most humanitarian arrivals have come from Southeast Asia, Middle East, and Africa.

Previous research has shown that individuals who experience traumatic and life-threatening events commonly report a re-evaluation of their purpose in life, improved family and community relationships, and greater sense of spirituality and resilience in the face of adversity.^{4–6} Traditionally, resilience has been conceptualized as an individual attribute (the capacity of an individual to bounce back),⁷ but there is a drive to

understand resilience as an “ongoing and dynamic process of adaptation”(p.600)⁸ that is developed through interactions between the individual, their family and community, and the social institutions.⁹ Communities are “actors that respond to adversity” or threats from the environment, and this is particularly important for marginalized communities (p.66).¹⁰

The process of resettlement into a new country often involves a transition from the traditional setting of family and close ethnic community to a situational community of interdependent relationships between people from a diversity of backgrounds, including members of the host community. Social and community support, in particular, is associated with increased psychological wellbeing among refugees and with their ability to cope with the challenges of resettlement.^{11 12}

What happens when refugee migrants are affected by natural disasters in their countries of resettlement? How their previous refugee experience impacts on their response to a natural disaster? Very limited research has been conducted to date to investigate these issues among resettled refugee communities. Osman and colleagues investigated how former refugees living in Christchurch (Canterbury Province, New Zealand) coped after the September 2010 earthquakes. They found that worry and anxiety, hyper-vigilance, feelings of helplessness and fear of further earthquake trauma was common among all ethnic groups interviewed. Overall, “married participants with children were more anxious than single participants, and females were significantly more anxious than males”(p.4).¹³ Three quarters of participants reported coping well with the earthquakes by using their strong cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. Eighty percent reported not receiving enough support from government agencies.¹³

A submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry 2011 by the Multicultural Development Association (MDA),¹⁴ reported that the January 2011 floods displaced about 70 MDA refugee client families and that 30 families had ongoing complex needs at the time of the submission. Most of the clients reported “feelings of uncertainty, fear, isolation and helplessness during the flood crisis” (p.5).¹⁴ Despite these feelings, many refugee clients approached MDA with offers to help others during the flood clean up. MDA caseworkers reported that many clients were experiencing difficulties adjusting to new homes and that the trauma due to the floods was “further compounded for many by re-traumatisation from previous experiences in their home countries as well as settlement issues already present in adjusting to life in Australia” (p.6).¹⁴ Some refugee clients were reluctant to accept mental health support services and chose to stay with family and friends instead of moving to new or temporary accommodation. According to MDA, many refugee families who were directly impacted by the floods were at risk of homelessness.¹⁴

Given the limited research available, this paper reports on a study investigating the impact of the 2011 Queensland floods on a cohort of men from refugee backgrounds living in Southeast Queensland. It focuses on the exposure to and impact of the floods on the first 100 respondents who were interviewed between September 2012 and March 2013. The paper also looks at changes on participants’ relationships with their neighbours after the floods, and how resettled men from refugee backgrounds perceive the impact of the past refugee experience on their capacity to cope with environmental disasters.

METHODS

This paper reports on a follow up of a cohort of men from refugee backgrounds who participated in the 2008–2010 SettleMEN project.¹⁵ SettleMEN was a longitudinal investigation of health and settlement outcomes among a group of 233 men from refugee backgrounds who were living in Southeast Queensland. SettleMEN participants were interviewed four times between 2008 and 2010 at 6-month intervals with an overall loss to follow up of 10% (i.e. 210 out of the initial 233 participants completed the 2010 interview). In early January 2011, severe floods devastated many areas of Southeast Queensland. The SettleMEN study has yielded pre-disaster measures of health and settlement among this cohort of refugee men. The current study has offered a rare opportunity to investigate and describe the impact of an environmental disaster on the health and wellbeing of a resettled refugee population.

The study uses a mixed-method approach. A survey was administered in person by peer interviewers to study participants in their preferred language. Peer interviewers were trained in basic research skills and the ethical conduct of research. The survey included a combination of quantitative and open-ended questions. The

questionnaire consisted of the following sections: (1) About you (socio-demographic characteristics); (2) About what you do (educational and occupational indicators); (3) About your health (health status, wellbeing, anxiety and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of health services); (4) About your family and the social support you have (family composition, family and social support); (5) About your life in Australia (living arrangements, experiences living in Australia, discrimination and other forms of social exclusion); and (6) 2011 Queensland flood impact. Flood impact questions were adapted from previously published disaster research.^{16 17} This paper focuses on the flood impact section findings.

Descriptive statistics (percentages) are used to summarise key demographic and flood impact variables. Thematic analysis has guided the interpretation of the qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions.

RESULTS

Participants' characteristics

At the time of writing, 100 out of the original cohort of 210 participants had been contacted and interviewed. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and pre-migration characteristics of participants. Participants were born in eight different countries, with 72% born in Africa (the majority in South Sudan, followed by Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Congo, and Liberia), 21% in the Middle East (Iraq), and the remaining 7% in Southeast Asia (Burma). Respondents have been in Australia for an average of 6 years, and over half of them were living in the Toowoomba/Gatton region of Southeast Queensland.

Table 1 Demographic and pre-migration characteristics of participants (n=100)

Characteristic	
Age in years [mean \pm SD (range)]	36.7 \pm 8.7 (22 – 62)
Time in Australia in months [mean \pm SD (range)]	76.5 \pm 17.3 (50 – 105)
Place of residence during 2011 Queensland floods	
Greater Brisbane	48 (48%)
Toowoomba/Gatton	52 (52%)
Region of birth	
Africa	72 (72%)
Middle East	21 (21%)
Southeast Asia	7 (7%)
Places lived most of your life	
City	42 (42%)
Rural area	28 (28%)
Refugee camp	29 (29%)
Religion	
Christian	73 (73%)
Muslim	27 (27%)
Highest educational level completed	
Secondary education or lower	28 (28%)
TAFE/college/trade (other than English course)	46 (46%)
University degree	26 (26%)
Marital status	
Never married	42 (42%)
Married/de facto	54 (54%)
Separated/divorced	4 (4%)
Current employment status	
Employed full-time	24 (24%)
Employed part-time or casual	51 (51%)
Unemployed	25 (25%)

Exposure to and impact of the 2011 Queensland floods

Fifty six percent of participants had to temporarily evacuate or move out of their homes because of problems

with water flooding in January 2011, 54% reported that there was flood water in the property they were living in, and 51% got water in their homes. Eighty one percent of respondents reported that close family or friends from the same ethnic background had to be evacuated or moved out of their homes during the floods.

Table 2 summarises the impact of the 2011 Queensland floods on participants. Overall, more than half of the participants were impacted by the floods in terms of disruption to their work, loss of income, and damage to property and personal belongings. Seven out of ten respondents reported that the floods had either a moderate or major impact on their emotional wellbeing. Over half reported that the floods had a severe impact on their families and their ethnic communities.

Table 2 Impact of the 2011 Queensland floods (n=100)

Impact	N(%)
Temporarily or permanently out of work due to the flood	65 (65%)
You or other household members lost income	58 (58%)
Experienced damage or loss to property or possessions	52 (52%)
Other people moved into your home due to the flood	35 (35%)
You were ill or injured due to the flood	39 (39%)
Other household members ill or injured	41 (41%)
Flood had a moderate/major impact on your emotional wellbeing	73 (73%)
Flood had a severe impact on your family	58 (58%)
Flood had a severe impact on your ethnic community	64 (64%)

Previous refugee experience and the 2011 Queensland floods

Sixty five percent of participants reported that their previous refugee experience helped them to better cope during the 2011 Queensland floods. For a number of respondents, the refugee experience of war and trauma could not be compared to that of natural disasters. For example, a participant stated that “I don’t think that my past experience as a refugee or having witnessed persecution in my home country will help me cope better with the floods since the situation is quite different in their nature”, while another said: “Different kind of experiences, not like the flood”.

A distinction between the predictability of man-made and natural disasters was highlighted by one participant: “Since I have gone through numerous problems back in my home country, Burma, the problem of flood the Australian people have seen in January 2011 is less scary. In general, natural disasters are predictable and can be avoided, however man made disaster like civil war is shocking and cannot be predicted”. Similarly, another respondent stated: “In my home country the problem is man made disaster civil war. This kind of problem is an ongoing issue and cannot be predicted. I had been in this situation almost my entire life and many of the experiences were far worse than I could imagine. In Australia situation like flood and other natural disasters are predictable and do not happen very often therefore if this kind of disaster does occur I would have less worry about safety and security”.

Many respondents compared their previous hardship experienced as humanitarian refugees with what they went through during the floods. As shown in the following statements, past adversities assisted them to cope with the situation during and after the flood:

“As a refugee you cope many problems in regard to food, water even medical but during the flood, I did not fear worse. As I was used to worse in refugee camp I coped well during the floods”

“Although I was young while in the refugee camp, the experience of living in hardship has assisted me cope better with the flood”

“During the civil war in Darfur-Sudan, we sometimes missed and go without food for three days. These experiences have helped my wife and I to cope better during the flood”

“I spent two days without hot meals. In spite of that, I was not badly affected due to my previous experiences as a refugee”

However, participants compared their experiences with that of their children, many of whom had not experience disasters prior to the 2011 floods. One respondent explained that: “Although my wife and I were not

much affected due to our backgrounds from South Sudan, my children were very much affected since they have never experienced such disasters in their lives”, while another said: “Although we lost many of our belongings due to flood water we were not affected very much in comparison to our children who were seriously affected. It is because they have never witnessed such an event in their life time”.

Respondents often compared the government assistance and services available in Australia with those received in their home countries when assessing their coping experiences during the floods. For example, one participant stated: “Care and security level we get from government, social structure we are living in are far better than our country. For this reason I feel secure and safe even in the time of natural disaster”. Another participant explained that: “The experiences in my homeland were far worse and still I could manage to survive. First, in the time of great difficulties I know and understand how to cope emotionally and physically whereas in Australia the support we got from government are sufficient”.

During the floods, a number of participants used past strategies and skills learned during their refugee experience, as shown in the following statements:

“I was able to apply strategies used before as refugee in dealing with difficult situations such as relaxation approaches to monitor positive mental state”

“[Previous refugee experience] helped us prepare and act in a safe manner to protect ourselves like what we would do during war times”

“It reminded me about life in camps and war... how to evacuate... keeping calm, courageous and following instructions on how to evacuate the area we were living in. Of course my previous experience helped me a lot to cope with the floods. Compared to Australians I was very much less stressful than they were”

“Placing and moving of people and properties. Positive mind state to motivate and encourage others to safety”

“There was flooding in refugee camps before. I learnt survival swimming skills”

Changes in relationships with neighbours

Participants were asked whether the floods had any impact on their interaction with their neighbours. Thirty percent reported that they had no or very limited interaction with their neighbours. For example, several informants stated: “my neighbours hardly speak to me”. One respondent said: “I rarely engage with my neighbours therefore there hasn’t been any changes in relationship with my neighbours before or after the floods”, while another stated: “since I rented the unit, my neighbours never talked to me, and there was no change or interaction during the flood”. Twenty one percent of participants reported having good, friendly interactions with their neighbours prior to the floods and that there were no changes after the floods. Several respondents stated: “I have good neighbours and we have good interaction with them”. One participant reported: “no much change as we interact freely with my neighbours”, while another stated: “there was no change in our interaction, we continue with normal good relationship”. Having good relationships with neighbours also meant that participants were able to receive useful information during the floods. For example, one informant reported: “we discussed about preparedness about the floods”, while another said “my neighbours informed me about the weather conditions”.

For 14% of participants, providing assistance to their neighbours during the floods impacted positively on their relationship. For example, one respondent stated: “due to the assistance I rendered to my neighbour’s children, our interaction has improved”, while another said: “the interaction between my neighbours and I has improved because we assisted them to drain water out of their houses”. One participant explained how his neighbours “began to greet me because I assisted them in the floods”.

DISCUSSION

This paper has described the impact of the 2011 Queensland floods on a cohort of 100 men from refugee backgrounds residing in Southeast Queensland. Overall, we have found that the floods had a considerable economic and psychosocial impact on this group of men, their families and communities in terms of being forced to evacuate their homes, work disruption, loss of income and personal belongings, and emotional distress. Many of these men reported that their previous refugee experience helped them to cope better during and after the floods, and for some, providing assistance to others during the floods impacted positively on their relationship with their neighbours.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that has investigated the impact of a natural disaster on former refugees living in Australia. A recent study by Osman and colleagues¹³ assessed how 72 former refugees (55% males) coped after the September 2010 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand. They found that three-quarters of participants reported that they had coped well despite most of them not experiencing an earthquake before and less than 20% receiving support from mainstream agencies. Surprisingly, 72% of the participants in the New Zealand study had not experience a traumatic event before. Similar to Osman *et al.* study, which reported that married couples with children were more likely to worry about the earthquakes, our participants who had children also stated that the floods were particularly stressful for their children because they had not experienced any disaster prior to the 2011 floods.

Previous research has shown that the capacity of former refugees to cope with the challenges of resettlement is strongly linked to the support and protection of their new community.¹⁸ Successful long term resettlement depends not only on the capability of refugees to maintain the bonding links of the immediate family and ethnic community, but also on their ability to develop bridging links with their new neighbourhoods and other members of the society.¹⁸ However, previous analysis of social capital among this cohort of refugee men found a significant decrease in bridging relationships over time.¹⁵ Importantly, some of our participants reported that their experiences during the floods had a positive impact on their interaction with neighbours. For them, facing a natural disaster created an opportunity to greet and be greeted, to help and be helped by those living next door. Building community at the neighbourhood level can be an important strategy to cope with disasters. The ability of societies to adapt to environmental disasters is “determined, in part, by the ability to act collectively”(p.387).¹⁹

Our paper has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the current analysis is based on the first 100 participants (from the original cohort of 210) who completed the first follow-up survey more than two years after the 2011 Queensland floods. Some of the figures included here regarding the exposure to and impact of the floods may vary once all interviews are completed. Second, the time period between the floods and data collection may have influenced the recollection of participants’ experiences during the floods. Third, given that the original study cohort was recruited using a non-probabilistic sampling technique, our findings may not be representative of the entire population of men from refugee backgrounds who experienced the 2011 Queensland floods.

Nevertheless, our study has shown how the previous experiences of human rights abuses, loss, trauma, displacement, flight and refuge are perceived by many former refugees as tools to better cope with natural disasters. This challenges the “dominant Western deficits model that defines refugee people as traumatised victims (...) at the expense of resilience and coping strengths [which] may in fact contribute to or prolong the alienation of refugee people and impede their inclusion into Australian communities”(p.56).⁶ In fact, refugee people’s strengths and capabilities, including the survival skills developed during their refugee experience, can enhance a neighbourhood or community’s ability to cope with and adapt to extreme weather events and other environmental disasters. Refugees’ capabilities should be recognised and considered when developing disaster reponse strategies at the neighbourhood and community levels.

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