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# **Levels of social trust among men from refugee backgrounds after the 2011 Queensland floods**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This paper examines the relationship between flood exposure and levels of social trust among a cohort of adult men from refugee backgrounds who were affected by the 2011 Queensland floods in Australia.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

A quantitative questionnaire was administered to 141 men from refugee backgrounds almost two years after the 2011 Queensland floods. The survey was administered in person by trained peer interviewers, and included a number of standardised instruments assessing respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, levels of social trust towards and from neighbours, the police, the wider Australian community, and the media, and exposure to and impact of the floods. Multiple logistic regression analyses were used to assess the relationship between flood exposure and social trust adjusting for pre-disaster levels of trust and other potentially confounding variables.

### **Findings**

Participants with higher levels of flood exposure were significantly more likely to report greater levels of trust both towards and from their neighbours, the wider Australian community, and the media, and they were also more likely to believe that most people can be trusted.

### **Research limitations/implications**

Although the study reports on data collected two years after the floods, the analysis has adjusted for pre-disaster measures of social trust and other socio-demographic variables.

### **Originality/value**

Our paper has highlighted the important place of social trust and social capital for refugee communities in a post-disaster setting. Disaster responses that support social capital among marginalised populations are critical to increasing community resilience and supporting recovery.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Environmental disasters, Social trust, Social capital, Flooding

## Introduction

War, violence, political and social exclusion, and displacement across national borders constitute central elements of the refugee experience (UNHCR 2004; Pittaway 2004). 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” (United Nations 1951). At the end of 2012, the number of refugees worldwide was estimated at 10.5 million (UNHCR 2013). Refugees are entitled to protection and assistance by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and 26 countries currently provide humanitarian resettlement programs for refugees (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme 2012). During the period 2004-2013, a total of 140,642 refugee and humanitarian visas were granted by the Australian government (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014). Of these, 55% were males and 45% females, with the majority coming from Southern and Southeast Asia, Middle East, and Africa.

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 (Fielding and Anderson 2008). Social capital (Bourdieu 1986), understood here as those “connections among individuals– social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000)(p.19), is highly relevant to refugee migrants (Loizos 2000) as they use it to leverage resources during flight (Amisi 2006) and refuge in both countries of asylum and settlement (Calhoun 2010). Social and community support, in particular, are associated with increased psychological wellbeing among refugees and with their ability to cope with the challenges of resettlement (Schweitzer et al. 2006; Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee 2007). For newly arrived refugees, social

capital can also facilitate information provision, support networks, friendships, sense of belonging, and access to material goods and resources, all of which supports processes of settlement. Social capital has also been argued to form a critical foundation for recovery and resilience after disaster, including environmental disaster (Aldrich 2012). Although social capital is commonly measured with questions about the level of social trust (Glaeser et al. 1999), trust is better understood as an outcome of social capital (Putnam 2001).

In a globalised world where societies are linked “in a complex, economic, political, social, environmental and moral web of consequences” (Marsella and Christopher 2004)(p.521), environmental disasters are no longer isolated events (Raphael 2011). Importantly, with increasing environmental disasters worldwide, humanitarian refugees are at higher risk of finding themselves confronted with yet another challenge in their new resettlement setting. What happens to refugee migrants’ levels of social trust when they are affected by environmental disasters in their countries of resettlement? This paper reports on the levels of social trust reported by a cohort of men from refugee backgrounds who were affected by the January 2011 floods in South East Queensland, Australia. The flood caused the loss of 23 lives, severe damage to thousands of properties, and the evacuation of 20,000 people (van den Hornet and McAneney 2011). In particular, the paper examines the relationship between flood exposure among men from refugee backgrounds and their levels of social trust both towards and from neighbours, the police, people from the wider Australian community, and the media.

## **Methods**

### *Sampling and data collection*

Between 2008 and 2010, the SettleMEN longitudinal study followed a cohort of 233 refugee migrant men living in South East Queensland to document their health and settlement experiences (Correa-Velez and Gifford 2011). A follow-up study with 141 participants (61% of the original cohort) was conducted in 2012-13, almost two years after the January 2011 floods, to investigate the

impact of this environmental disaster on the wellbeing and settlement of a resettled refugee population. Full ethics approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology Human Ethics Committee.

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and a peer interviewer model. Trained peer interviewers administered a survey to participants face-to-face and in their preferred language. The survey included a number of standardized instruments that assessed participants' socio-demographic characteristics, educational and occupational experiences, health and wellbeing, family and social support, and their experiences of life in Australia (Correa-Velez and Gifford 2011), including exposure to and impact of the floods. Flood impact questions were adapted from previously published disaster research (Queensland Health 2011; Ginexi et al. 2000). Two focus group discussions were conducted with 25 participants to explore in more detail their experiences during and after the floods. This paper reports on the quantitative results and focuses on the relationships between flood exposure and levels of social trust. Social trust items were adapted from the Social Capital Community Benchmark survey (Kennedy School of Government 2000).

### *Statistical analysis*

Demographic and flood impact variables were summarized using descriptive statistics. A 'Flood exposure index' was constructed using 14 items: temporarily evacuated/moved out of home; got water in home from the flooding; got water in the property you lived in; lost water service; lost electricity; damage or loss to your property or possessions; workplace or work practice was disrupted; temporarily or permanently out of work due to floods; other members of household temporarily or permanently out of work due to floods; lost income due to floods; ill or injured due to floods; anyone else in household ill or injured due to floods; close family or friends from ethnic community evacuated or moved out of their home; anyone moved into your home. The index ranged from 0 (no exposure) to 14 (severe exposure), and was dichotomised into 0 (lower exposure) and 1 (higher expo-

sure) based on the median (median=5).

Multiple logistic regression analyses were used to assess the relationship between flood exposure (using the dichotomous ‘flood exposure’ variable) and levels of social trust both towards and from neighbours, police, the wider Australian community, and the media. All regression analyses were adjusted for previous levels of trust (which were assessed 6 to 12 months before the floods) and other potentially confounding variables including age, time in Australia, region of birth, religious affiliation, income, and highest educational status. Odds ratios (OR), 95% Confidence Intervals (95%CI), and p-values are reported here to summarize the regression models. SPSS (IBM SPSS v21) was used to analyse the quantitative data.

## **Results**

### *Participants’ characteristics*

Participants’ demographics and pre-migration characteristics are shown in Table 1. Participants’ mean age was 36.2 years (SD = 8.2 years; range = 22–62 years) and their average time in Australia was 6 years (SD = 1.4 years; range = 4–8 years). Most respondents (75%) were born in Africa, were employed (77%), and reported good levels of English language proficiency (74%). At the time of the 2011 Queensland floods, 52% of respondents were living in the Toowoomba/Gatton region (regional) and 48% in the Greater Brisbane (urban) area of South East Queensland.

Table 1 about here

### *Impact of the 2011 Queensland floods*

Participants’ overall exposure to the floods is summarized in Table 2. Overall, prevalence of flood exposure indicators ranged from 31% (ill or injured due to floods) to 76% (close family or friends from own ethnic community evacuated or moved out of their home due to their home). Forty-two percent reported that they got water in their home from the flooding.

Table 2 about here

### *Flood exposure and levels of social trust*

Table 3 shows the adjusted multiple regression results for the levels of social trust on the basis of flood exposure. After adjusting for levels of social trust prior to the floods and other potential confounders, participants with higher levels of flood exposure were significantly more likely to report greater levels of trust towards their neighbours, people from the wider Australian community, and the media. Similarly, men with higher levels of flood exposure were significantly more likely to report feeling trusted by their neighbours, by people from the wider Australian community, and by the media. Neither trust towards the police nor feeling trusted by the police were statistically significant ( $p>0.05$ ). Overall, compared to participants who experienced lower levels of exposure to the floods, those with higher flood exposure were significantly more likely to believe that most people can be trusted.

Table 3 about here

## **Discussion**

This paper has described the relationships between flood exposure and levels of social trust among a cohort of 141 refugee migrant men living in South East Queensland. Overall, we have found that participants with higher levels of flood exposure were significantly more likely to report greater levels of trust both towards and from their neighbours, the wider Australian community, and the media, and they were also more likely to believe that most people can be trusted.

To our knowledge, this is the first study that has investigated levels of social trust among a resettled refugee population following an environmental disaster. Furthermore, very few studies have reported on the impact of an environmental disaster on former humanitarian refugees. An ethnographic qualitative study with 20 Vietnamese and Montagnard adult refugees resettled in North Carolina



(United States) explored the nature of individual and family resilience to a potential environmental disaster (Xin et al. 2013). It found that participants had individual strengths and strong family cohesion but were vulnerable to environmental disasters due to their lack of adequate information, financial resources, emergency supplies, and broader social support. The study, however, did not measure social capital or levels of social trust.

Osman and colleagues (Osman et al. 2012) 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. 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. However, no levels of social capital or social trust were assessed in this study.

More recently, Marlowe (Marlowe 2013) reported on the organizational implications for disaster preparedness and response from the perspective of resettled refugees from Bhutan, Afghanistan and Ethiopia who also experienced the 2010 Christchurch earthquakes in New Zealand. He found that “being together has been one of the most helpful ways of responding to, and preparing for, disasters” (p.440). Importantly, he argued that “whilst the participants emphasized the need for local responses to adverse circumstances, there is still a particular need to develop relationships with diverse grouping of people across a given society” (p.440). Moreover, as refugees often face social exclusion in sites of settlement (Correa-Velez, Spaaij and Upham 2013; Correa-Velez, Gifford and Barnett 2010), greater levels of social capital and access to essential resources can be developed by strengthening relationships with the wider community (Marlowe 2011). Reporting on the same study with refugees in Christchurch, Marlowe and Lou (Marlowe and Lou 2013) found that although participants described “limited interactions with the wider Christchurch community prior to the earth-

quakes”(p.62), “all three communities stated that the earthquakes had brought them closer to the wider Christchurch community and for some it was the first time they had met their neighbours” (p.63). Our quantitative data support these qualitative findings. Importantly, we found that resettled refugees who experienced higher levels of exposure to an environmental disaster reported significantly greater levels of social trust, not only to their neighbours but also to the wider host community and the media. Recent cross-country and panel data analyses examined the relationship between environmental disasters and social trust, and found that *storms* in particular “lead to statistically significant and substantial positive changes in societal trust” (Toya and Skidmore 2013) (p.23). However, contrary to our findings, the cross-country regressions found a negative correlation between *flooding* and trust although these results were not robust and not corroborated by the panel analysis (Toya and Skidmore 2013).

A number of limitations should be acknowledged. Our study reports on data collected two years after the Queensland floods and this may have influenced participants’ recollection of their level of disaster exposure. In addition, the study could not assess whether levels of social trust changed soon after the floods or increased gradually over the post-disaster period. Nevertheless, as this is part of a cohort study, we have been able to adjust our analyses for pre-disaster levels of social trust. The original cohort was recruited using quota sampling, a non-probabilistic sampling technique. Thus, our findings may not be representative of all refugee migrant men who experienced the 2011 floods. Finally, this study involved refugee migrant men only and therefore cannot be generalized to the experiences of resettled refugee women or children.

In the refugee context in particular, successful settlement depends on bonding social capital (links with family and ethnic community) and bridging and linking social capital (links with neighbours, institutions, services, and the wider host community) (Fielding and Anderson 2008; Loizos 2000). In a previous analysis, conducted prior to the floods, we found a significant decline over time in bridging

relationships among this cohort of refugee migrant men (Correa-Velez and Gifford 2011). Importantly, our current analysis indicates that a devastating event such as an environmental disaster can have a spillover benefit; it can enhance refugee migrant men's social trust which may lead to an increased sense of community and support processes of recovery and resilience following environmental disaster. Other studies of environmental disaster have indicated that peripheral, vulnerable or marginalized groups - who typically have more limited social capital and lack ties to local/national authorities, services and extended social support networks – often disproportionately experience the adverse effects of disaster, and may even be harmed by those holding stronger social capital (Aldrich 2012). Indeed, it is widely recognized that the negative effects of disasters are typically concentrated among the most socially vulnerable members of societies - including the elderly, women and girls, and minority populations (Aldrich 2012). Conversely, disaster-affected populations with strong social networks experience faster and better recovery due to their access to information, services, resources and tools, and assistance. Yet our analysis of the impact of the Queensland floods among a cohort of men with refugee backgrounds suggests that environmental disasters can also lead to increased opportunity to develop social capital and increased sense of community among a socially marginalized group.

'Sense of community', a key dimension of social capital (Norris et al. 2008), is "an attitude of bonding, or mutual trust and belonging, with other members' of one's group or locale" (Perkins, Hughey and W 2002)(p.37). Sense of community is also a dimension of community capacity (Goodman et al. 1998) and an attribute of resilient communities (Landau and Saul 2004; Pfefferbaum et al. 2005). Standard analysis of post-disaster recovery focus on quality of governance, levels of physical damage, socioeconomic and demographic contexts, and population density. Increasingly, however, social resources and social capital are positioned as critical factors in post-disaster recovery and resilience (Aldrich 2012). Although there is some evidence that greater ethnic diversity within a country or region may be associated with lower levels of social solidarity and trust (Putnam 2007;

Knack and Keefer 1997), environmental disasters may offer an opportunity for individuals and communities to “work together to address their collective challenges” (Toya and Skidmore 2013)(p.9). As stated by Norris and colleagues (Norris et al. 2008), “disasters happen to entire communities. Members are exposed together and must recover together. At a minimum, if their aim is to build collective resilience, communities must develop economic resources, reduce risk and resource inequities, and attend conscientiously to their areas of greatest social vulnerability (...) In a nutshell, disaster readiness is about social change” (p.145).

Negative experiences during flight and resettlement may adversely impact the levels of social trust among refugee migrants (Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012). Such negative experiences potentially hinder refugees’ wellbeing, sense of belonging, safety and security, and integration into their host communities. Social change that provides a welcoming environment to refugee migrants and acknowledges their strengths and capabilities as equal and active members of the host society can be an important strategy for disaster readiness. Disaster responses that support positive social change, including development of social trust and social capital among refugee migrants and other marginalized populations, are also critical to increasing community resilience and supporting recovery. In an era of climatic change and high population mobility, it is increasingly important to consider the resources that can best support recovery and resilience among displaced and migrant groups. This paper has highlighted the important place of social capital for refugees in a post-disaster setting.

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Table 1. Participants' characteristics (n=141)

Characteristic	n (%)
Age categories (years)	
22 – 35	69 (49%)
36 – 45	55 (39%)
46 and over	17 (12%)
Country of birth	
South Sudan	83 (59%)
Iraq	23 (16%)
Burma (Myanmar)	12 (8%)
Burundi	10 (7%)
Democratic Republic of Congo	5 (4%)
Rwanda	5 (4%)
Other	3 (2%)
Religious affiliation	
Christian	111 (79%)
Muslim	30 (21%)
Marital status	
Never married	59 (42%)
Married/de facto	78 (55%)
Separated/divorced	4 (3%)
Highest educational level completed in Australia	
None/secondary education	13 (9%)
English course	53 (38%)
Technical/College/Trade	55 (39%)
University degree	20 (14%)
Current employment status	
Employed full-time	46 (33%)
Employed part-time or casual	62 (44%)
Unemployed	32 (23%)
Weekly income	
A\$399 or less	30 (22%)
A\$400 – A\$799	88 (63%)
A\$800 or more	21 (15%)
English language proficiency	
Good	105 (74%)
Poor	36 (26%)



Table 2. Impact of the 2011 Queensland floods on participants and their communities (n=141)

Impact	n (%)
You temporarily evacuated/moved out of home	65 (46%)
You got water in home from the flooding	59 (42%)
You got water in the property you lived in	62 (44%)
You lost water service due to floods	70 (50%)
You lost electricity due to floods	85 (60%)
Damage or loss to your property or possessions	62 (44%)
Your workplace or work practice was disrupted due to the floods	86 (61%)
You temporarily or permanently out of work due to floods	82 (58%)
Other members of household temporarily or permanently out of work due to floods	68 (48%)
You or household members lost income due to floods	74 (53%)
You were ill or injured due to floods	43 (31%)
Anyone else in household ill or injured due to floods	45 (32%)
Close family or friends from ethnic community evacuated or moved out of their home due to floods	106 (76%)
Anyone moved into your home due to floods	47 (33%)

Table 3: Adjusted <sup>a</sup> multiple logistic regression models assessing the relationship between flood exposure and levels of social trust among men from refugee backgrounds (higher flood exposure is the response category and lower flood exposure is the reference category)

Trust item	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval	<i>P</i> -value
I trust my neighbours	7.1	1.6, 31.2	0.009
I trust the police	4.9	1.0, 24.2	0.052
I trust people from the wider Australian community	6.1	1.6, 23.4	0.008
I trust the media	12.3	3.8, 40.4	<0.001
My neighbours trust me	6.4	1.4, 28.4	0.015
The police trust me	2.2	0.5, 9.9	0.294
People from the wider Australian community trust me	4.7	1.0, 21.7	0.049
The media trust me	13.9	3.6, 53.8	<0.001
Most people can be trusted	4.6	1.4, 15.3	0.013

<sup>a</sup> Adjusted for level of trust prior to the floods, age, time in Australia, region of birth, religious affiliation, weekly income, and highest educational status.