

VULNERABLE AND RESILIENT? IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN DISASTERS

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ABSTRACT

This sociological study explores how immigrants and refugees, many of whom are linguistic minorities, experienced the 2010-2011 disasters in Canterbury (New Zealand) and Tohoku (Japan). The focus is on their perceived social vulnerabilities and resilience to disasters. Previous research has found that linguistic minority immigrants and refugees are socially vulnerable as they occupy a position of relative deprivation compared to majority groups. However, findings drawn from in-depth interviews demonstrate the fluid, complex and contextual nature of social vulnerabilities in disasters, suggesting that people may be simultaneously vulnerable *and* resilient. The current disaster resilience paradigm can be misleading as it suggests that some of the socially vulnerable may be *naturally* disaster resilient. This study, utilizing key-informant interviews drawn from snowball sampling, suggests that they can be resilient partly because of the everyday inequalities that already confront them, and because of their previous experiences of disasters. Wars, conflicts, displacement and everyday hardships have given them “earned strength” and made them disaster *resilient*. Employing Bourdieu’s theoretical notions of capital, this study demonstrates how these victims were active social agents in these disasters, using a variety of resources (capitals) to cope with them. In-depth analysis of their individual and collective experiences can help disaster researchers to re-conceptualize the social vulnerability approach and disaster resilience thinking. Further, examples of the ways in which they individually and collectively coped with disasters can provide practical knowledge to help researchers, practitioners and policymakers develop more effective disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies.

KEY WORDS: *Capital, Earned Strength, Resilience, Social Vulnerability, Sociology of Disasters*

RE-THINKING RESILIENCE

There has been a noticeable shift in disaster research from the vulnerability approach to resilience thinking. The emphasis is on disaster prevention and risk reduction, instead of disaster response (Tierney, 2014). This thinking became particularly prevalent in disaster research after the Hyogo Framework for Action in 2005. The term “resilience” now outnumbers “vulnerability” in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015. Resilience has become the most important concept for promoting more effective and efficient disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies (Dodman, 2016).

Resilience thinking emerged from ecology (Holling, 1973) and has now spread across disciplines, although its premises have been frequently challenged (Alexander, 2013; Manyena, O’Brien, O’Keefe & Rose, 2011; Masterson, Peacock, Van Zandt, Grover, Schwarz & Cooper 2014; Payton & Johnston 2006). Prominent criticisms of resilience include: 1) it is resource-dependent in some cases, possibly meaning that the more resources people possess, the more resilient they can be, 2) resilience approaches individualises social vulnerability and obscures structural inequalities, 3) it lacks clarity: “what kind of resilience for whom?” (Neocleous, 2013; Pike, Dawley & Tomaney, 2010), and 4) resilience connotes “bouncing back” rather than bouncing forward, which may be undesirable to victims if it entails a return to vulnerability (Manyena et al., 2011).

The rapid shift in disaster discourse saw policymakers, practitioners and researchers emphasize resilience without properly understanding social vulnerability in disasters, particularly pre-existing social structural inequalities which often create uneven disaster impacts. The social vulnerability approach helps us identify more vulnerable groups and individuals in disasters, yet the current disaster resilience paradigm misleads. It suggests that vulnerability can be reduced by promoting resilience because vulnerability and resilience are binary opposites, or that they exist in an inverse relationship to each other (Rodin & Garris, 2012). The simple logic at work here is that if you are resilient in disasters, you will not be vulnerable. While vulnerability and resilience are closely related, this relationship is more complex. It is also misleading (and politically troubling) to suggest that some of the socially vulnerable may be *naturally* disaster resilient and that *anyone* can be resilient without addressing the types of deprivation that the socially vulnerable confront.

Consequently, we argue that resilience thinking needs to be re-conceptualized to reflect the actual experiences of the socially vulnerable. This will create a more effective DRR strategy. To emphasize the point, this sociological study explores how immigrants and refugees, many of whom are linguistic minorities, experienced the 2010-2011 disasters in Canterbury and Tohoku. These groups have been understudied in disaster research, although it is acknowledged that other groups such as the poor,

racial/ethnic minorities, women, and those with disabilities, are also socially vulnerable in disasters. The research that has been done on linguistic minority immigrants and refugees shows that they occupy a position of relative deprivation compared to majority groups (Santos-Hernández & Morrow, 2013). Moreover, there is a lack of sociological research on these vulnerable groups from their perspectives. Thus the focus is on their perceived social vulnerabilities and resilience to disasters and its complex relationship. However, findings drawn from in-depth interviews demonstrate the fluid, complex and contextual nature of social vulnerabilities in disasters, suggesting that people may be simultaneously vulnerable *and* resilient.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The data used for our qualitative analysis was primarily drawn from the 28 in-depth interviews with immigrants and refugees conducted in Canterbury and Tohoku in 2015 and 2016 (14 in Canterbury and 14 in Tohoku). Interviewees were first contacted through the researchers' personal networks, colleagues and supporting organizations such as Tohoku Help! and the Christchurch Refugee Council (CRC). Further interviewees were then selected through referrals from the first sets of interviewees (snowball sampling). Interviewees include both males and females and various age groups and nationalities with different cultural backgrounds in order to capture diverse experiences of these disasters. All interviews were informal and open-ended. They were conducted at locations comfortable for the interviewees. A set of open-ended interview questions was created prior to the interviews based on our pilot study and literature review. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed (and translated to English if necessary) by the researchers for qualitative analysis. Further, some publicly available secondary data such as "Women's Voices" (Christchurch Branch of National Council of Women of NZ, 2014) and *Experiencing Disasters in Foreign Land: 3/11 for Koreans Living in Tohoku* (The Great East Japan Disasters Korean Immigrants Interview Project, 2015) was also used to include more voices of immigrants and refugees in these disaster-affected areas.

EARNED STRENGTH: VULNERABILITY GIVES RESILIENCE

Interviewees noted a variety of strategies and resources/capital that they used to cope with the disasters and their aftermath. One of the many significant themes to emerge from our primary and which is present in the secondary data can be analyzed with reference to McIntosh's (2007) concept of "earned strength". Some socially vulnerable can be resilient partly because of coping with the everyday inequalities which already confront them (Marlowe, 2013), and because of their previous

experiences of disasters. Those who face social inequality on an everyday basis might have earned “strength” to get by in disasters because their everyday experiences of social marginalization contribute to their disaster resiliency (Davidson & Davidson, 2009).

Some of our Canterbury interviewees, such as Somali and Afghani refugees, explained that because they had gone through civil war, displacement and then resettlement in a foreign country, the series of 2010-2011 earthquakes was, while scary, still easily manageable. Because many of these refugees restarted life in the new host country without much capital, they have collected and created capital such as developing durable social networks to depend each other to collectively get by life’s everyday hardships and systemic inequalities. They had the cultural and social capital to be disaster resilient: prior experiences, practical knowledge, cultural values and attitudes of how to support each other – in order to survive in chaotic situations, to survive without basic necessities such as water and power and to *restart* their life without major government assistance. In this sense, earned strength acted as cultural capital, which was an important yet unintended outcome of ongoing social inequality. Another Canterbury interviewee, a former Iraqi soldier and refugee to New Zealand, lived through multiple wars and had first-hand battlefield experience. In comparison to this, the earthquakes were minor traumas. Indeed, he felt compelled to help his neighbors who panicked and who could not react quickly to protect themselves from the earthquakes’ direct and indirect threats. His prior wartime experience made it easier for him to deal with shaking ground, collapsing houses, distraught neighbors and the post-quake chaos.

Similarly, some Korean immigrant women’s stories from our interviews and the book, *Experiencing Disasters in a Foreign Land: 3/11 for Koreans Living in Tohoku*, by The Great East Japan Disasters Korean Immigrants Interview Project (2015) helps us understand how their earned strength as cultural capital helped to deal with the disasters that impacted upon them. Most of these immigrant women decided to move to Japan to get away from the everyday hardships and “bad luck” they had in their home countries. After being recruited, moving to Japan and getting married to Japanese husbands (most of whom are farmers and fishermen), they now faced the oppression and discrimination mainly due to patriarchy and the traditional Japanese family system, the language barrier, and different cultural norms and expectations. We can assume that their experiences of being oppressed both pre- and post-migration to Japan might have made them somewhat disaster resilient. It is worth noting that they were facing the actual disasters (3.11) and “everyday disasters” for being non-Japanese immigrant “mail order” wives. However, some of the Korean and Filipino immigrant women respondents in Tohoku repeatedly reported that they had been happy with the fact that the disasters actually made them *visible* to the wider Japanese public. This has been empowering for them. Prior to the disasters, they were socially invisible, isolated in small rural communities. Thus, while the

negative impacts of disaster cannot be denied, these women obtained social and symbolic capital in being both recognized by, and connected to, the people outside of their closed communities. Ironically, without the disasters, it is likely that they would have remained oppressed and unnoticed because, as they pointed out, they would not have received as much public attention and support.

Similar examples are found in the existing disaster literature. The Vietnamese community in the Eastern New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2001 is arguably the paradigmatic example here. Community members' previous experiences of the Vietnam War, displacement, resettlement and racial discrimination in the host country gave them earned strength. This enabled them to make what many regard as an exemplary recovery (Leong, Airriess, Chen, Keith, Li, Wang & Adams, 2007). Consequently, "Katrina was a minor inconvenience" (Father Vien, quoted in Shenker, 2006, para.32). This community's resilience is often treated as an exception to the social vulnerability framework; however, all of these stories show us why some socially vulnerable are disaster resilient. Against the typical assumption of some individuals being naturally resilient, it is their previous experiences of everyday structural inequalities and hardships which give disaster resilience. This does not apply to all socially marginalized groups: compare the Vietnamese community's experiences in New Orleans with those of the African American communities, who remained vulnerable.

BOURDIEU'S CAPITALS

Bourdieu (1986, p.243) uses capital to refer to resources in the broadest sense. This capital may be economic (financial assets), cultural (skills and education), social (networks and group membership) or symbolic (rewards accruing from status). Capital possession determines one's place in the social order. One can see why Bourdieu's work is normally used to explain inequality and its perpetuation. But some of these non-economic forms of capital, particularly social capital, can also make groups resilient to disasters. Indeed, in some disasters, poor groups may cope better than others (Klinenberg, 2003). This suggests that there can be important resources beyond the merely financial. For example, Klinenberg's (2003) study stresses the value of what we might term "social infrastructure", the development of neighborhood ecologies of support. Bourdieu would understand this as "social capital". Aldrich (2011) also found in his study of Kobe's disaster recovery from the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that social capital conclusively proved to be a more significant and important recovery factor than other factors that are more typically employed to explain recovery (like physical damage and economic conditions). We give additional examples below.

VULNERABLE OR RESILIENT, OR VULNERABLE AND RESILIENT?

The paradox of resilience – that some groups and individuals are simultaneously vulnerable and resilient – is not only observed in immigrant and refugee communities. We also see it amongst other minority groups such as the Māori community in Canterbury during the 2010-2011 earthquakes. Tangata whenua in Christchurch showed remarkable disaster response and recovery (Kenney & Phibbs, 2015; Lambert, 2014), yet, according to New Zealand government reports, Māori are socially marginalized and disadvantaged in comparison to other ethnic groups (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Using Bourdieu's conceptual schema, we can say that their economic and symbolic capital was low compared to Pākehā, but their cultural and social capital was high. We can also say that Māori resilience does not eradicate social vulnerability. This resilience comes from facing everyday hardships and inequities.

We can also bring McIntosh back into the analysis: earned strength can be considered a form of cultural capital for these socially vulnerable, but it implies that socially vulnerable groups often inherit and create a set of capital/resources such as durable social networks in order to survive and deal with their "everyday disasters". In other words, they have developed and obtained unexpected disaster coping abilities, as an unintended consequence of the structural social inequalities they experience. Social vulnerability gives resilience, so some groups and individuals in disasters may be vulnerable and resilient simultaneously, rather than – as academic discussions suggest – vulnerable or resilient.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that immigrants and refugees can be resilient partly because of the everyday inequalities that already confront them, and because of their previous experiences of disasters. Wars, conflicts, displacement and everyday hardships have given them earned strength. This has made them disaster *resilient*. Further, by employing Bourdieu's theoretical notions of capitals this study demonstrated how these victims were active social agents in these disasters, using a variety of resources to cope with them. In-depth analysis of their individual and collective experiences can help disaster researchers re-conceptualize the social vulnerability approach and also disaster resilience thinking. Examples of the ways in which they individually and collectively coped with disasters can provide practical knowledge to help researchers, practitioners and policymakers develop more effective DRR strategies. The great policy challenge going forward is how to build capitals and earned strength without subjecting marginalised populations to enduring hardship.

DISCUSSION: THE PARADOX OF RESILIENCE

As emphasized here, some socially vulnerable groups and individuals are resilient simply because they possess earned strength arising from their position of social vulnerability. Vulnerability gives resilience in some cases. This paradox of resilience remains unexamined. As such, a critical yet complicated question remains: How do we make policymakers, practitioners and other researchers aware of this? How do we achieve the vitally important dual task of promoting resilience and reducing vulnerability within marginalized groups?

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