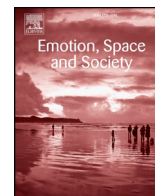




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

Coping, caring and believing: The embodied work of disaster recovery workers



Christine Eriksen

Australian Centre for Culture, Environment, Society and Space (ACCESS), School of Geography and Sustainable Communities, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Disaster recovery
Faith
Holding environment
Coping capacity

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the embodied experiences of coping, caring and believing by disaster recovery workers in Australia in the context of the growing frequency and intensity of disasters, especially bushfires. The study draws on three concepts: faith as performative, embodiment, and the 'holding environment' as a system that shapes coping capacity. Faith emerges in the study as having two modalities (introspection and group-communion) that are not synonymous with religious adherence. Instead it is linked to the holding environment, which comprises the strategies that individuals and groups have developed to cope with risks and exposure, through their embodied responses, and the observed responses of others, to the impact of potential and actual harm. The holding environment provides mental, spiritual and physical spaces and practices where disaster recovery workers can safely confide, reflect, debate, grow and heal. These processes, in turn, provide anchor points and sense of purpose. They also accentuate the individual and collective choices we face in terms of mitigating and adapting to growing social and environmental uncertainty with climate change.

1. Introduction

Wildfire, known in Australia as bushfire, is a constant and ongoing part of Australian history, ecology and culture. Yet, longer fire seasons and an increase in extreme fire weather days with climate change add both uncertainty and urgency to Australia's ability to coexist with fire in the future (Eriksen, 2014). The growth in the frequency and intensity of bushfires experienced in Australia (and internationally) during the last decade has demonstrated that 'business as usual' will no longer suffice (O'Neill and Handmer, 2012; Rickards, 2016). The current bushfire crisis is not just an environmental emergency. Rather, the causes are often social, ethical and political, hidden in embodied vulnerability, embedded social norms, and unequal power structures at home, at work, in society, and at heart (Sewell et al., 2016; Eriksen and Head, 2014; Sword-Daniels et al., 2018). The myriad of views and desired outcomes that drive social causes of environmental problems, highlight a need for dismantling local barriers and understanding motivations for action in order for individuals and communities to take greater responsibility for their ability to cope with disasters (COAG, 2011; Prior and Eriksen, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Gaillard, 2010).

Attitudes, awareness and actions towards bushfire management are tied to a range of emotions and experiences that are deeply embedded in traditions and everyday life (Paveglio and Edgeley, 2017; Eriksen and Gill, 2010). Most Australians acknowledge that bushfire is not only

a risk to life and property but also an agent of environmental change with ecological and cultural significance (Pyne, 2006; Gill et al., 2015). Bushfire management can therefore be equally about control and belonging, or fear and alienation, with memories and experiences of bushfires impacting people's sense of who belongs where and why. It is as much a social and cultural issue as it is about the science of the fire (Moritz et al., 2014). The past decade has seen a growth in social science research that demonstrates the central role of social characteristics and the politics of belonging in understanding vulnerability and resilience to disasters generally (Wisner et al., 2004; Roth et al., 2017; Sword-Daniels et al., 2018), and bushfires specifically (McCaffrey et al., 2013; McCaffrey, 2015; Eriksen and Simon, 2017). Yet, these studies have rarely considered the role of faith in coping with bushfires, and there is an identified scarcity of literature that examines belief systems, natural hazards and disasters more broadly (Gaillard and Texier, 2010; Schipper, 2010; Wisner, 2010).

This paper focuses on a set of in-depth interviews with disaster recovery workers in Australia to examine the links between their embodied experiences of coping and caring and their narratives of faith in self, others, nature and the supernatural. The study draws on three concepts: faith as performative, embodiment, and the holding environment. It builds on the turn in geographies of religion towards spaces of everyday life, such as Klingorová and Gökariksel's (2017) study of how everyday spaces are transformed into sacred sites through

E-mail address: ceriksen@uow.edu.au.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100592>

Received 29 January 2019; Received in revised form 9 July 2019; Accepted 9 July 2019

1755-4586/© 2019 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

the embodied and emotional practices of both religiously- and non-affiliated women seeking calmness, peace, and transcendence. However, unlike recent geographical work on the ordinary sacred (Klingorová and Gökarksel, 2017), the secular and officially sacred (Tse, 2014), post-secular rapprochement (Clope and Beaumont, 2012), or the suggested shift from post-secular narratives to infra-secular geographies (della Dora, 2018), this study does not use sites of worship, or the making of contemporary religious sacred spaces, as a baseline for understanding faith. It goes beyond conventional notions of faith, such as the traditional or religious belief systems examined by Schipper (2010) in the context of fatalistic responses to climate change and disaster risk.

In this paper, faith is defined as belief that is not synonymous with religious adherence. The essence of faith, whether sacred or secular, emerges in this study as being either: a) individually grounded by 'trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely' (Salzberg, 2002, 1), or b) collectively created through self-transcendence and intersubjective realities. This approach, centring on how risk, impact and strategies are 'held' by embodied experiences and faith, aligns with Holloway's (2003, 1963) argument for 'a corporeal poetics of sacred spatiality ... allowing the body to signify and make sense of sacred space ... [to] challenge the duality of the sacred and profane'. It also speaks to literature on resilience and faith-based actions, which has argued that 'the assimilation and mutually reflexive transformation of secular and theological ideas may represent crossover narratives around which post-secular partnerships can converge around particular ethical precepts and practical needs' (Clope and Beaumont, 2012, 27). It points to an emphasis on praxis, rather than dogma, within faith-motivated communities, suggesting that such praxis enable connections and transformation across and between sacred and secular beliefs. Solnit (2009) demonstrates such praxis in the context of the community cohesion that often arises in disasters. She points to the performative notion of faith in the form of religion 'not as community or belief but as practice, as a craft of refining the self into something more adequate to the circumstances we face, more able to respond with grace and generosity' (Solnit, 2009, 115).

The paper thus responds to the call for 'a science of loss' (Barnett et al., 2016) – a science based on socially engaged research that aims to enhance our individual and collective capacity to cope with climate change (see also Graham et al., 2018). The results presented in Sections 4, 4.2 and 5 align with the argument that 'Though unsettling, embracing the possibility of loss may be the best means of offsetting its harm' (Barnett et al., 2016, 978). By examining the 'situated and inherently subjective nature of values', this paper produces knowledge of loss by grounding it in 'the social and environmental milieu of people's lives' and by unpacking how 'people's bodily experiences and senses influence their cognition' (Barnett et al., 2016, 977).

The paper transfers the 'holding' metaphor originally derived from Winnicott's (2018) concept of the 'holding environment', as a template for unpacking disaster recovery workers' practices of coping, caring and believing. The concept has been applied to diverse contexts, from Winnicott's psychoanalysis in the mid-twentieth century of critical early childhood development, to the learning environment of social work students (Ward, 2008), the caregiving space surrounding asylum-seeking children (Wilding, 2017), and the psychologically supportive environments created in business and leadership to foster adaptive work, such as dialogue, sense-making and conflict resolution (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002; Culmsee and Awati, 2012). Polykala (2018) describes a holding environment as the created properties of a system resulting from relationships, rules, goodwill, rituals and benevolent authority, which – if strong – 'enable people to feel safe enough to broach difficult issues but not too safe to avoid the tough stuff', such as long-held beliefs, traditions and identities or latent power imbalances, burnout and stress. A robust holding environment, such as those described in Sections 4 and 5, provides 'spaces' for individuals or groups where it is safe to learn, adapt, or grow in the face of challenging circumstances. However, as Wilding (2017) argues, a holding environment can also be

weak, patchy, and delicate depending on its capacity and the people held within it. The flexibility of the holding environment concept makes it an ideal template for analysing how disaster recovery workers cope, care and believe in the face of regular exposure to hardship and uncertainty. It opens up insights into the role of faith and embodiment in coping with intensifying disasters, such as bushfires in Australia.

2. Disaster recovery in Australia

Disaster recovery in Australia is 'the coordinated process of supporting disaster affected communities in the reconstruction of the physical infrastructure and the restoration of emotional, social, economic and physical wellbeing' (AIDR, 2018). Disaster recovery workers should not be confused with first responders, such as fire fighters and police officers, whose job entails being first on the scene of an emergency. Rather, disaster recovery workers are called upon when an evacuation is ordered during the response phase (as explained below). The recovery process is guided by a set of national principles, which acknowledge the importance of understanding coordination, complexity, community context, flexible community-led approaches, continual assessment and capacity building (AIDR, 2018). State and territory governments are responsible for emergency management in their jurisdictions, while Emergency Management Australia (a division within the Attorney-General's Department) coordinates the Australian Government's federal support, both physical and financial. In a major emergency, a coordinated effort across government and non-governmental organisations work together to reduce the effect and consequences of emergencies – from first response to long-term recovery. The focus in this paper is on the two states represented by the research participants – New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria (Vic) (although several participants also had first-hand experience from emergencies in other parts of Australia and overseas).

In NSW, disaster recovery is the responsibility of the NSW Department of Justice, Office of Emergency Management (OEM). The NSW Welfare Services Functional Area Supporting Plan (NSW OEM, 2018) details the management arrangements that provide welfare services during all stages of the emergency cycle in accordance with the NSW Community Welfare Act 1987 and the NSW State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989. The latter Act provides the legislative basis to establish Emergency Management Committees at state, regional and local government levels, and prepares the NSW State Emergency Management Plan 2016 (NSW OEM, 2019). When an evacuation is ordered during the response phase, the Welfare Services Functional Area Coordinator (WelFAC) establishes and manages evacuation shelters and recovery centres through partnership arrangements outsourced to third party institutions, three quarters of which are faith-based organisations. These third-party organisations rely predominantly on voluntary workers. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) provides emergency accommodation; the Salvation Army provides and coordinates catering services; Anglicare provides basic material aid and general support services; and the Australian Red Cross provides psychosocial support services. In Vic, state relief is the responsibility of Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), supported by the Australian Red Cross. The Vic State Emergency Response Plan 2016 (SERP) aligns with the Vic Emergency Management Act 2013, which form a part of the Emergency Management Manual Victoria (EMV, 2018). SERP is the primary reference document for all agencies with a role or responsibility in emergency response and recovery, and incident leads and support agencies for relief services range from municipal councils to government departments and faith-based organisations.

The secular premise that underpins emergency management in Australia provides an interesting contrast to the outsourcing of many essential welfare services to Christianity-based organisations during disaster response and recovery. The contrast sits uneasily between the supposed separation of the State and the Church in post-colonial Australia and the dynamic relationships of today's multi-cultural

Australia with its hazard-prone environment (Head, 2016). In the 2016 Australia Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2017) more Australians than ever (30%, up from 22% in 2011) identified as having no religion, including people with secular and other spiritual beliefs. Nevertheless, 52% of Australians (down from 61% in 2011) still reported an affiliation with a Christian religion – predominantly Catholic (23%) and Anglican (13%), while the most common non-Christian religions were Islam (2.6%) and Buddhism (2.4%). This diversity makes different dimensions of secularisation relevant when considering the intersectionality of faith and disasters, such as the degree to which religious behaviour (individual and collective) play a role in people's lives; the type of values that people prioritise for their society, community, families, and themselves; and the level of scepticism about matters of religious faith in shaping public options (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). The plurality of sacred, spiritual and secular faiths among the research participants described in the following sections, enabled observation and analysis in this study of behavioural and thought patterns across religious, spiritual and secular affiliations.

3. Methods

Semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals and one focus group with 33 participants were conducted between October 2016 and January 2017 (ethics approval ref. HE16/365). Five of the focus group participants were subsequently interviewed individually and are included in the interview sample. All interview participants who volunteered to participate in the study were at the time based in either New South Wales or Victoria. They were involved in disaster recovery work regionally, nationally or internationally in the capacity as faith leaders/Reverends (n = 2), group supervisors (n = 4), recovery coordinators (n = 6) and volunteers (n = 6) for organisations with a secular underpinning, such as the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), the Australian Red Cross, and NSW Police, or faith-based organisations, such as ADRA, Anglicare, CatholicCare, Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, and the Uniting Church.

Ten of the interview participants affiliated with a religion (Christianity), one self-described as an agnostic Christian, and seven identified as atheists (two of which worked for faith-based organisations). All focus group participants belonged to the same Anglican Christian denomination in NSW. All research participants were Caucasian, ranging in age from early-30s to late-70s with a range of vocational backgrounds – notably, nursing, child protection, community development work, chaplaincy, and international aid work. Sixty percent were women and 40% men. The study does not claim to be a representative sample of all disaster recovery workers. Rather, it uses in-depth, qualitative insights obtained from narrative interviews to establish a baseline of knowledge of the hitherto little-known role of faith in the embodied work of disaster recovery workers in Australia, which manifests as deep-seated truths or intersubjective realities.

The study was informed by qualitative research methods that valued the ability of narrative interviewing and narrative analysis to reveal storied ways of knowing and communicating (Riessman, 2006). This methodological approach speaks to the conceptual lens of the holding environment, as narrative interviewing and narrative analysis, like a holding environment, has the ability to elicit deep-seated truths through a dynamic process of meaning-making. As Riessman argues (2006, 189):

‘Narratives do not mirror, they refract the past. Imagination and strategic interests influence how storytellers choose to connect events and make them meaningful for others. Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was. The ‘truths’ of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present and future.’

Interview questions were designed to guide the conversation along

four themes: (1) why participants chose to work in disaster recovery; (2) what training (formal and informal, if any) they received for particular roles; (3) how participants navigate strong emotions, beliefs and associated customs of people they encounter through their work; and (4) what tools (coping mechanisms) they use to process the cognitive, emotional, physical and spiritual impact of their work. Interviews occurred at a location of the participants' choosing, to ease any potential discomfort or concern relating to discussing organisational issues or emotionally charged stories, and lasted between 45 and 120 min. The 1-h focus group coincided with the quarterly meeting of a regional group of disaster recovery volunteers. It provided an opportunity to explore and discuss in greater detail the themes that emerged during the interviews.

Both the interviews and focus group were audio recorded with the participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed in the qualitative data analysis software program QSR NVivo v.11, which aids systematic coding of large sets of data. Thematic analysis was used to emphasise content (*what* was said) and structural analysis focused on the act of telling (*the way* a story was told). *A priori* (e.g., roles, concerns, caring practices) and emergent themes (e.g., emotions, politics, social norms) were initially coded in a hierarchical node structure that gradually evolved to provide oversight of overarching themes (parent nodes) and detailed aspects of each theme (child nodes). This was followed by the creation of case classifications (attributes) for each participant (faith type, gender, role, organisation). The nodes and characteristics were used to create hierarchy charts and comparison diagrams, and to run queries (word frequency, text search, coding query, matrix query) in NVivo v.11 (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). The interview quotes included in the result's section are representative examples that provide greater insights into the thoughts and behavioural patterns, which underpin the key themes derived from the quantitative analysis presented diagrammatically.

4. Results

4.1. Formative tensions: risk, impact, strategy

I think most of us would have a faith of some description. We have a shared heart for the community, a shared heart for people, and we have worked together to get this community recovery happening. (P7, female, religious, team supervisor, Salvation Army)

As espoused in this opening quote by a Salvation Army worker, faith is multifaceted. The quote alludes to how individuals embody “a shared heart”, and the intersubjective realities that are collectively created by disaster recovery workers to get “recovery happening”. The emphasis on “faith of some description” highlights that no single description encompasses all modalities of faith. Instead, “faith of some description” is a fitting way to describe why participants in this study chose to work in disaster recovery. Social justice, community connectedness, a sense of purpose, and religion were the key motivators for believing in their disaster recovery work. One Salvation Army worker believed strongly in the shared truth underpinning voluntary work:

I have a volunteer ethic. I think we live in a great country and it's only great because we make it that way. (P5, male, agnostic, volunteer, Salvation Army).

A Red Cross worker took this outlook a step further by describing how a fundamental belief in humanity's inherent goodness drives his work:

I don't think there's anything much more complex than working in disasters. You have life in all its guts and glory. You see that rawness and that's beautiful to me. ... Most people have never experienced death. Most people have never seen someone suffer. Most people don't see, or at least realise, how many random acts of kindness and goodness happen

daily. ... Working in disasters, you see all of that. You see everything and it's really compressed in intense, challenging environments. There's no easy solution. It's a little microcosm of life. I love that. It's a fascination with the bare bones of life, of humanity. (P9, male, atheist, recovery coordinator, Red Cross)

The Red Cross worker's "love" of the intense emotions inherent in disasters – "the bare bones of life" – is known among disaster researchers as the way disasters strip bare layers of society. Part of the fascination with disasters, is its ability to expose new cracks, existing unknown cracks, as well as the cracks that were plastered over deliberately (Eriksen, 2014; Dominey-Howes et al., 2016). Faith is one of the layers that are made visible through the cracks that emerge when disaster strikes (Robinson, 2014; Koenig, 2010; Stern, 2007). This is evident in a Uniting Church Reverend's description of how faith shows up through cracks that reveal "how small and vulnerable we are":

When a disaster strikes or some major tragedy happens, people are shattered because the reality of life is different to what we assume. The world is benevolent. There is meaning. But the things that we assume happen to other people, those sorts of assumptions suddenly get turned on their head. The things that you've trusted in, and primarily put your faith in, it's in the fact that we can control things. Things that we depend on suddenly aren't dependable, and it makes us realise how small and vulnerable we are. What do we depend on then? That's the stuff of spirituality and faith. ... You reach out for something beyond your own resources. (P3, male, religious, Reverend, Uniting Church)

The tangible sense of vulnerability that emerges when disasters "shatter" assumptions and control, creates an intense struggle with sense-making in the face of, what a Red Cross worker describes below as, the utter "randomness" of houses destroyed versus houses left intact in the wake of a disaster. The Red Cross worker and the Uniting Church Reverend's reflections accentuate how the psychological consequences of disasters can be doubled-edged. On the one hand, disasters can be a test of faith. On the other, faith can be an emergent property of disaster recovery.

For some people, thinking that it happened because it was God's will, I think takes away the randomness of disasters in some way. That's what a lot of people struggle with – the randomness. (P1, female, atheist, recovery coordinator, Red Cross)

In order to hold on to meaning amid chaos, the disaster recovery workers in this study tended to focus their attention on the purpose, simplicity and goodness that are an inherent part of acts of kindness. This is in addition to having the experiential knowledge to appreciate that the bleakest of hours are relative and contextual to a given person and place. Such outlooks on sustained healthy engagement with disasters stood out among the diversity of self-care and coping strategies highlighted by participants in this study, as outlined in Fig. 1.

Purpose, simplicity, goodness, and an appreciation that it is all relative, are to a great extent also what made disaster recovery work appealing to the participants who had experienced the systemic brokenness that pervades professions, such as child protection work.

When I started working in disasters, it was like, all the social program stuff that I had seen when I was working in child protection, but there was a reason for it. Like it wasn't a cyclical thing of poverty and brokenness and complete failure of society and all the rest of it. There was like a start date, and there is pretty much an end date to it. ... Like, it was the same but different. It was trauma, but it wasn't trauma because it was basically preordained before you were born. It was trauma because this one thing that was a completely explainable natural phenomena that you could rationalize happened, and that's different. Don't get me wrong, now I know it's more complicated, but that's what makes it easier in my head. (P8, female, atheist, recovery coordinator, Red Cross)

The ability to compartmentalise cause and effect, enables this Red

Cross worker to not get weighed down by the challenges of disaster recovery work. However, in emphasising "now I know it's more complicated", she is acknowledging that while official recovery efforts may have an end date when staff and resources are redeployed elsewhere, communities continue to struggle – often for extended periods of time, due to trauma and systemic social injustice that is the root cause of disasters (Roth et al., 2017). Social injustice can become an "analogy for life", as a WelfAC coordinator stated:

If you're in a disaster, disadvantaged people are usually more disadvantaged. They're more vulnerable because of mental health, economics, a whole pile of things. (P2, male, atheist, recovery coordinator, FACS)

The ways social injustice is magnified in disasters was evident on a grand scale in USA in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina (Klein, 2017), with significant implications for disaster recovery workers (Osofsky, 2008). It clearly also impacts participants in this study, for example, in the form of prolonged exposure, which was the most extensively discussed point of exposure to harm, among other issues such as organisational pressures, power dynamics and the vicarious trauma of listening (Fig. 2).

The hopelessness associated with systemic social injustice, which is evident either directly or indirectly in disaster recovery work, highlight the importance of disaster recovery efforts being coordinated in accordance with both community welfare and emergency management legislation in Australia. It also provides a strong sense of purpose for the participants in this study. Indeed, having clear priorities and purpose was the most discussed coping strategy across all interviews (Fig. 1) and during the focus group. Principal amongst these was the upholding of social justice values – a deep-seated truth that bridges the different organisational frameworks of care, regardless of religious or secular premises. As a CatholicCare worker involved in the long-term local recovery of a bushfire ravaged community explained:

We don't proselytise, everyone's welcome. People would door-knock and say, "I'm not Catholic, but can I come in?" "Yes". ... When I applied for the job the first question was, "How do you align yourself with our mission and values?" I said, "Well, I'm not Christian, but I've looked at your values and mission statement and it aligns perfectly with my values." Their values are pretty much inclusiveness and community for the clients – client-centred social justice. ... Christianity or faith informs the values of social justice, keepings that are Catholic social teaching around social justice, equality and inclusiveness and that kind of thing. (P11, female, atheist, team supervisor, CatholicCare)

While the notion of social justice bridges organisational premises, the ways this purpose is expressed in participants' narratives differed depending on spiritual leanings. Christian participants described the motivation to care for others and self through disaster recovery work, as a manifestation of religious faith and a practical expression of God's love. While participants who identify as atheist were also strongly driven by the principles of social justice, practical expressions of care were for them aligned with a secular notion of not doing harm – or as described by a Red Cross worker, making it "less worse".

This idea that you can fix people – many people who work in this stuff aren't comfortable with the idea that you can't fix things for people. That bad things happen and you can't fix them. Your ultimate aim should be to make it less worse [sic]. That you are doing what you can to make this situation less worse as opposed to fixing it. If you can't get past that, it will break you. Unless you are one of the rare and very special individuals, it will have to break you because in my experience, you can't fix it. In my experience that's good because if it was us [recovery workers] doing the fixing, that's scary because it's poorly-coordinated, under-resourced services. (P8, female, atheist, recovery coordinator, Red Cross)

The ability to not let the caring aspect of disaster recovery work

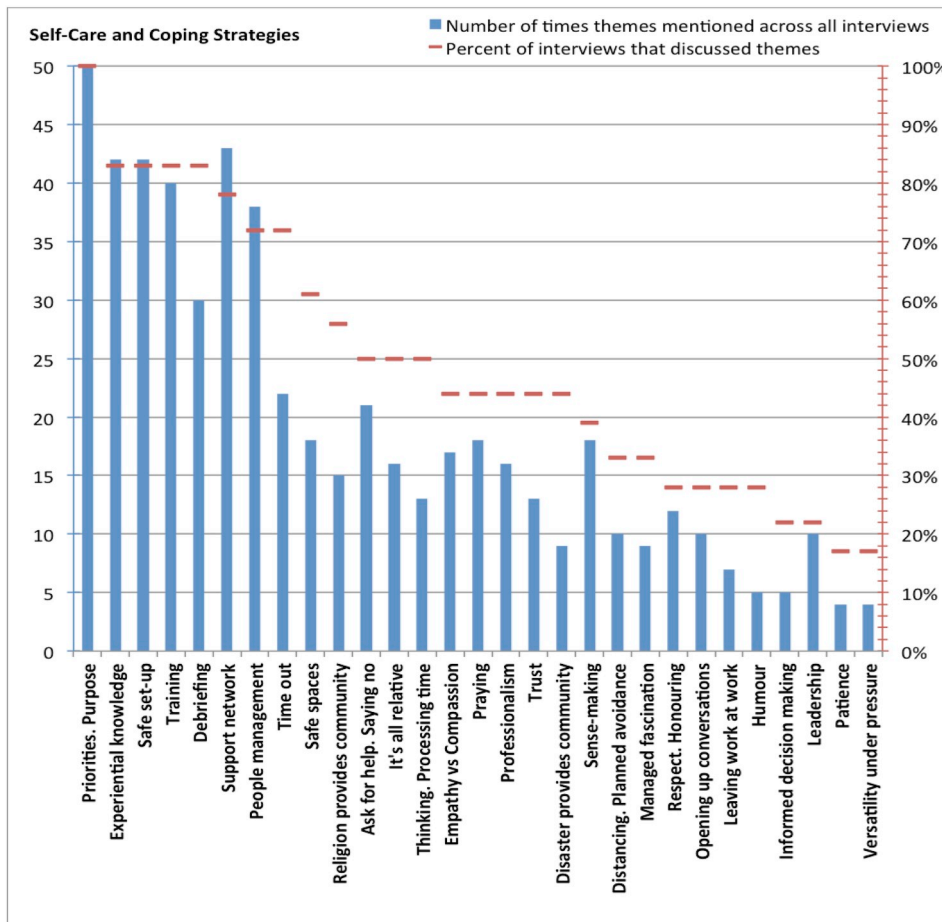


Fig. 1. Self-care and coping strategies highlighted by disaster recovery workers (n = 18).

“break you” highlights the need for disaster recovery workers to invest in self-care as much as in the care of others. Indeed, personal robustness and an ability to self-care is an essential component of a strong holding environment (see Section 5). Here, awareness of the differences

between responding with compassion (feeling with warmth and acting with care for another), empathy (feeling and suffering with another) and sympathy (feeling sorrow, concern or pity for another) is crucial, as it lies at the heart of faith, sense of purpose, and wellbeing (Brown,

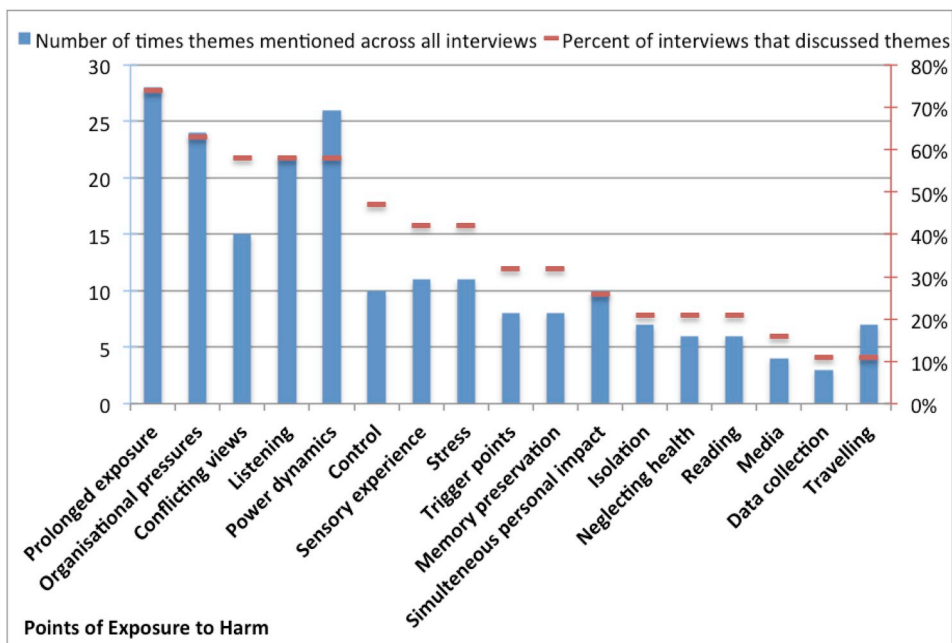


Fig. 2. Points of exposure to harm highlighted by disaster recovery work (n = 18).

2018; Eriksen and Ditrach, 2015; Nhat Hanh, 2015). Too much empathy can be debilitating (e.g., resulting in compassion fatigue), whereas the practice of nonjudgmental compassion can prevent fatigue and burnout. This awareness, however, is not always an easy distinction to manage in practice, as this quote stresses:

Faith is how you connect to something that's greater than yourself. That's the stuff of spirituality. I would say that compassion is deeply internal. ... The literal meaning of the word in Greek is that your guts move, it's just gut wrenching. ... That's the stuff that compels us to do this work, whether we're Red Cross or Anglicare or chaplaincy or whatever. It's our driver. Otherwise, why would you do it? You'd be disconnected from the need. It's different to sympathy that you can look on and say, "Isn't that a bad situation?" It's different from empathy where you can process what's going on in their worldview. This is the stuff that grabs you by the guts and pulls you in. I'd say it's the motivator. That's why there is a connection. That's how I understand it anyway. There's a connection. [CE: That's interesting because I would say that's also what gets us into trouble in these roles.] ... Yeah, there's a very direct link between compassion and vulnerability. The very thing that drives us into something is also the things that makes us very fragile and open to damage. It's tricky, isn't it? (P3, male, religious, Reverend, Uniting Church)

The “connection” described by the Uniting Church Reverend as the driver of disaster recovery workers arguably also underpins many of the responses – spiritual (Fig. 3), psychological and physiological (Fig. 4) – that interview participants had personally experienced. These responses are a result of the short- and long-term, positive and negative impacts of their work on their physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. These responses to the impact of working in disaster recovery, point to the way practices, experiences and faith become embodied through, for example, love of God and neighbour or existential questioning, forgiveness for self and others or blaming, the body releasing adrenaline to cope with short-term fatigue or the manifestation of long-term fatigue as trauma, depression and burnout.

4.2. Embodied work and modalities of faith

The embodied responses to the impact of disaster recovery work

(Figs. 3 and 4), as well as participants’ coping and caring strategies (Fig. 1), emerged during the data analysis as being aligned with two modalities of faith that carry participants forward individually (through introspection) or collectively (through group-communion) during exposure to uncertainty and hardship. This is not to say that other modalities of faith do not exist in addition to the two identified in this study.

The individually-grounded modality of faith is driven by personal-identity – an identity that is derived from mental, spiritual and physical spaces and practices where it is ‘safe’ to confide, reflect, debate, grow and heal (Table 1: Column A). Faith driven by personal-identity connects to an inner sense of clarity, trust and strength, and enables a deep connection with self and others (e.g., other’s suffering), which produces hope. The impact of bearing witness to hardship materialises in the examples in Table 1: Column A as embodied expressions of empathic pain, such as nonverbal communication, tears, a feeling of the body being weighed down, suffocation, and compassionate action. These expressions of empathic pain are processed via simple but powerful practices, such as sharing a cup of tea, reflective thinking while walking, the sharing of life and laughter with a loved one, praying while driving, being close to water, and physical exercise. Such practices constitute what Holloway (2003, 1966) describes as ‘processes of embodiment that act to enframe a space-time where spiritual insight can be gained’. Here, the spiritual insights involve contact with self-affirming mental, spiritual and/or physical safe spaces and practices that guide, reveal and inform. The examples demonstrate both that ‘empathic pain produces intimate knowledge of particular places’ (Fraser and Waitt, 2016, 183), and that ‘the sanctity of space is corporeally enacted and physically sensed as sacred’ (Holloway, 2003, 1965). The suggestion that empathic pain is integral to understanding the politics of hope (Fraser and Waitt, 2016, 185) is pertinent in disaster recovery where hope arguably is the essence of faith. When hope is ‘found in practices rather than particular emotions’ it can transform grief into a companion, which ‘we must acknowledge and hold if we are to enact any kind of effective politics’ and not let denial and fear paralyse us in the face of catastrophes (Head, 2016, 11 and 2).

The other modality of faith that emerged from the empirical data, is founded on a group-identity where embodied experiences and practices of disaster recovery work is processed through group-communion,

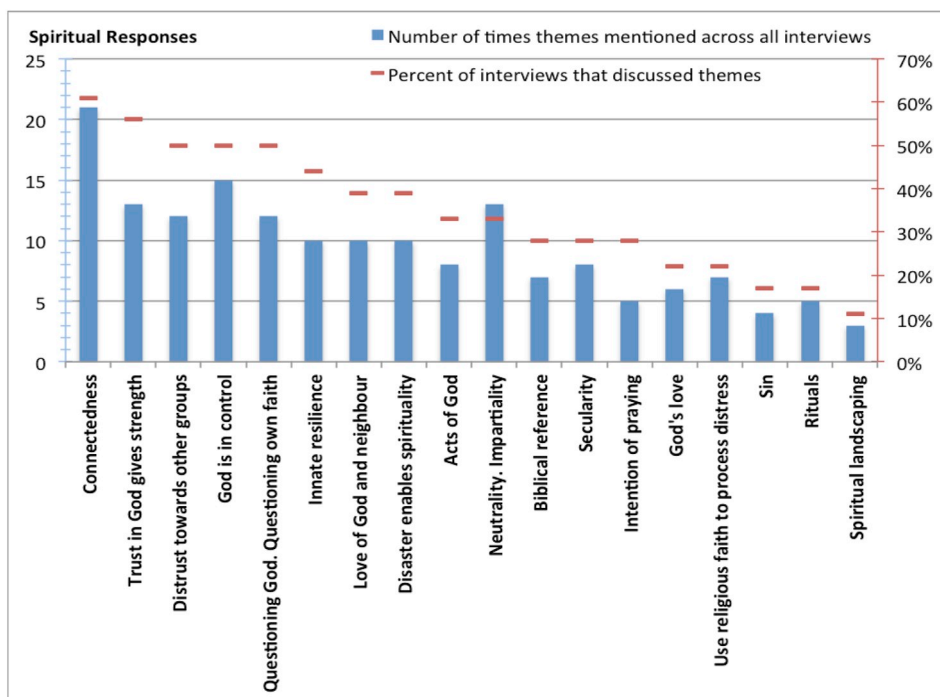


Fig. 3. Spiritual responses to the impact of disaster recovery work (n = 18).

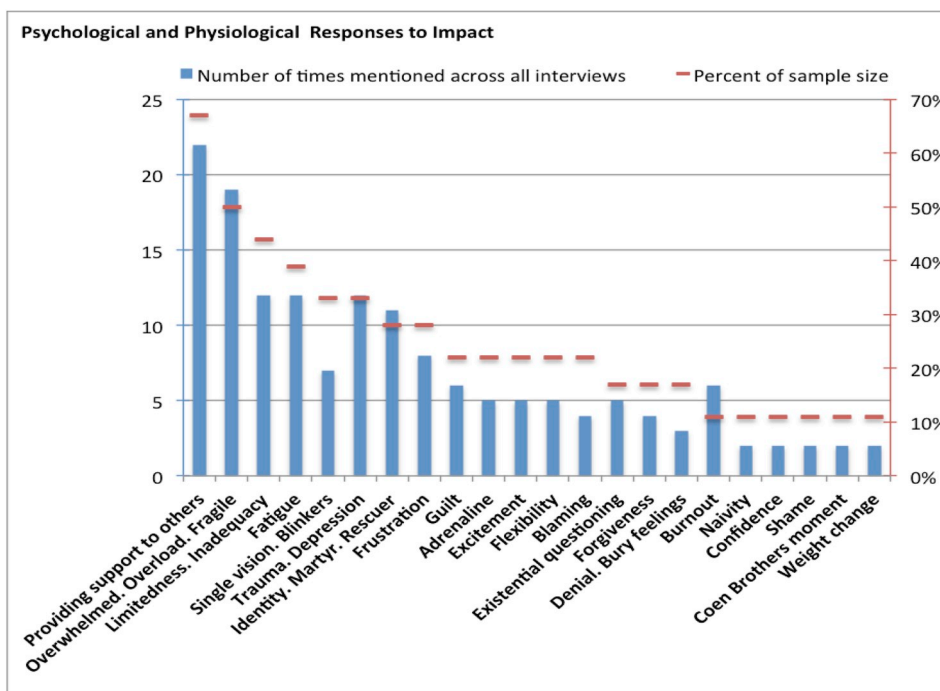


Fig. 4. Psychological and physiological responses to the impact of disaster recovery work (n = 18).

Table 1

Examples of spaces and practices associated with faith driven by personal- or group-identity.

A: Faith linked to personal-identity	B: Faith linked to group-identity
<p><i>So much communication is nonverbal. I think you get a much better picture of where someone's at just being face to face. Cups of tea. So many cups of tea. It puts people at ease, it's comforting. All positive associations. (P11, female, atheist, team supervisor, CatholicCare)</i></p> <p><i>Like we joke, my wife's quite short anyway and she's getting shorter and shorter with me offloading stuff onto her [laughter]. I find it helpful to share stuff with her. She works in development and so understands the topic well enough that we can talk about our work together. But it's not too close that it's suffocating. Otherwise, I try to keep work at work. I walk home from work and that's a really nice way to just to mull over everything. It takes 15-20 min to get home and then I'm done. (P9, male, atheist, recovery coordinator, Red Cross)</i></p> <p><i>Ohh, it's been very hard [starts to cry]. I found some days really hard and I cried a lot in the car on the way home [from the disaster recovery office]. Coming home some days, I'd leave the office and just the horribleness of it and I'd be praying on the 15-min drive home and I could just feel it coming off like a sandbag being lifted. (P7, female, religious, team supervisor, Salvation Army)</i></p> <p><i>Now when I'm in emergency situations, I won't feel what that person feels, so I will have empathy but I will have my head on, what can I do now to change that situation. That helps me when I'm in that situation. Then afterwards, I like to be on my own, just being close to water, near water, and just process my thoughts. If it's too heavy, exercise. Just power yourself out. (P12, female, religious, team supervisor, Anglicare)</i></p>	<p><i>I think some people will be more resilient because they belong to a community and often religion provides community for people. You are probably more likely to have better social capital if you're part of a religion than if you're not, but I think your resilience won't matter if you're this type of religion or that type of religion. Just because you go and join the Jewish community doesn't mean you're more resilient. It's how you engage with and how you are a part of the community. (P1, female, atheist, recovery coordinator, Red Cross)</i></p> <p><i>They say in the Pacific, well in Fiji anyway, the three most important things are faith, food and football. I would add family. So the four fs: faith, food, family and football. Which I think kind of sums up pretty much what holds people together. (P4, female, atheist, recovery coordinator, Habitat for Humanity)</i></p> <p><i>At the end of the fires, and after all those weeks of door knocking, five and a half thousand homes, I think, we did with Red Cross, we decided to have a debriefing over dinner. I thought, "I want to give everyone a gift. What can I do?" I bought two sheets of elastic. I cut it up into pieces and I gave everybody a piece of elastic and I said, "This is the gift I want to give you. It's not trivial. It's because you're flexible and you've been stretched, but you bounced back." Lots of them, you'll see them, they're still tied to their lanyards. They're really proud of it. (P13, female, religious, team supervisor, Anglicare)</i></p> <p><i>What am I going to do with my life that will last? The whole realm of spirituality and Christianity, the whole idea of eternity, of doing things that have eternal significance, was far more important to me than the temporal, and that includes the body. (P18, female, religious, Reverend, NSW Police)</i></p>

which establishes intersubjective realities and enables self-transcendence. Faith driven by group-identity connects to collectively created mental, spiritual and physical spaces and practices where it is 'safe' to confide, reflect, debate, grow and heal through interaction with people who share a common purpose, belief or relational support (Table 1: Column B). The impact of bearing witness materialises in the examples in Table 1: Column B as embodied expressions of "togetherness" – a collective strength with which to face adversity. The act of sharing food, football, family connections, a shared experience, or a shared religion, also constitute an embodied space-time where spiritual insight can be

gained. Here, however, the spiritual insights involve contact with shared (group-affirming) safe spaces that guide, reveal and inform through others – as the Red Cross recovery coordinator states, "it's how you engage with and how you are a part of the community" that makes you more resilient.

5. The holding environment

The overarching themes of the results presented above, gradually took shape during the data analysis as properties of a system – the

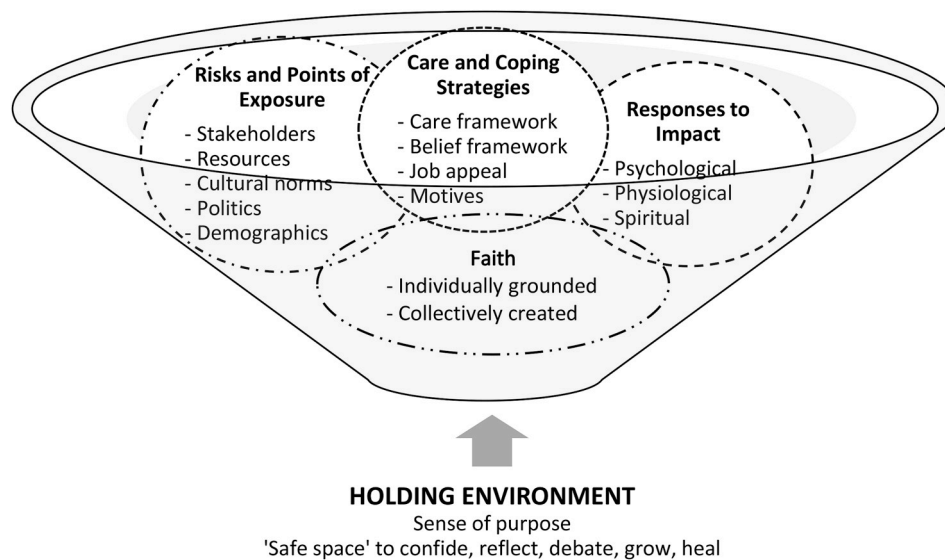


Fig. 5. The holding environment for disaster recovery workers' embodied work.

holding environment illustrated in Fig. 5. The processes that generate the holding environment enable the disaster recovery workers to feel safe and supported enough to confide, reflect, debate, grow and heal in the face of challenging circumstances. These processes comprise the *strategies* (praxis) that individuals and groups have developed to cope with risks and *exposure*, through their embodied *responses*, and the observed responses of others, to the *impact* of potential and actual harm.

The care and coping strategies (Fig. 1), which are part of the system generated to 'hold' the learning, adaptation and growth of disaster recovery workers, are informed by the care frameworks that participants work within (e.g., caring for carers, employee assistance programs, pastoral crisis intervention, psychosocial wellbeing, psychological first aid, self-care, social capital, WelFAC), as well as broader belief frameworks that shape their worldview (e.g., religion, personal life philosophy, social justice, community connectedness, social responsibility). Points of exposure to harm (Fig. 2) are linked to stakeholder groups (organisations, services, local community, volunteerism) and associated resources, as well as the cultural norms, politics and demographics that inform the social and geographical context of the outreach work. Together, these characteristics shape the individual ways people are impacted, and their consequent psychological, physiological and spiritual responses to potential and actual harm (Figs. 3 and 4).

The holding environment, so understood, encompasses both the welfare and adaptive capacity of participants' individual situations, as well as the frameworks and principles that variously guide and stipulate organisational disaster recovery practices in Australia. It encompasses the intertwined nature of the experiences shared across the interviews and focus group, and the embodied ways disaster recovery workers cope, care and believe. The formative tension between risks, impacts and strategies, is key to a holistic understanding of the embodied work of disaster recovery workers because it reveals how 'coping' includes difficult processes, such as broaching uncomfortable existential questioning or processing pain (from skin rashes and unintended weight loss to depression and trauma). The holding environment metaphorically 'holds' participants' experiences and struggles, by providing an active and dynamic set of processes, which encourage learning and growth. As eloquently described by Ward (2008, 80–81):

'The holding environment, then, is not simply a 'safe place' in which to learn but an active and dynamic process, orientated towards growth and change, and one which needs to be internalised by the learners so that they can discover not only what that means for themselves but also how they can provide it for others.'

The holding environment underpins both individual and collective levels of vulnerability and resilience because it is imbued with a sense that strong emotions, which may arise due to the challenging nature of disaster recovery work, will be respected, validated or contained by experiential knowledge, team members, leaders, nature or God. Safety is not a pre-condition, or always desirable, as it can be a by-product if the holding environment is robust. It is the associated processes that are 'safe'. In this way, the holding environment is both 'medium and message' (Ward, 2008, 80). By holding the processes that enable participants to construct and confirm the meaning of their experiences, these disaster recovery workers become familiar with the act of being appropriately held. This act, in turn, teaches or enables them to hold other people impacted by, or recovering from, disasters. It is this active and dynamic process that is the crux of how disaster recovery workers cope, care and believe.

6. Conclusion

This paper has applied the 'holding environment' as a conceptual tool to unpack how work is embodied, and faith is performative, in the praxis of disaster recovery workers in Australia. By examining the formative tensions between risk, impact and strategies, faith emerges as two performative modalities that are driven by either personal- or group-identity. Inner and collective strength, derived respectively from introspection and group-communion, rests on the ability to confide, reflect, debate, grow and heal through mental, spiritual and physical spaces that are 'safe'. These spaces are sacred to, and actively generated by, both atheists and religious believers, as they metaphorically 'hold' the processing of embodied expressions of empathic pain, while reaffirming a sense of purpose in disaster recovery. The holding environment 'holds' the processing of emotions – both positive (emotional calm, existential clarity, equilibrium) and negative (existential questioning, mental lows, emotional turmoil, disaster-wrought pain and trauma). The processes that generate the holding environment can also provide spaces free of harassment, judgement, and external stressors, which encourage reflection, meditation, being still, giving thanks, and worship. The resulting self-affirming or group-affirming sense of purpose, fosters compassion and care towards self and others.

Faith (whether sacred, secular, personal or group-based) is thus embodied in everyday life, improving many individuals' and collectives' capacity to cope with uncertainty. Disaster recovery workers in this study 'hold' themselves via the processes associated with individually-grounded and group-based faith. In so doing, they learn to 'hold' and help communities in recovery. This, in turn, helps disaster recovery workers renew

their faith, which enhances the holding environment. This emphasis on praxis, rather than dogma, enables connections and transformation across and between sacred and secular beliefs, because it accommodates the different modalities of faith and the intense emotions that emerge in disasters. Praxis supports people in the wake of disasters when they look within, at trusted others, or to God for answers (rather than to stipulated rules and regulations). This is an important point to consider when preparing for a future where disasters are predicted to be more frequent and severe. The holding environment as metaphor for understanding the praxis of disaster recovery workers, as explored in this paper, accentuates the individual and collective choices we face as a society, in terms of mitigating, adapting and coping with an uncertainty future.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks go to the research participants for their time and invaluable contributions. I am grateful for the encouragement provided by Sue Milne during many insightful conversations, and for the constructive feedback provided by Ananth Gopal and Gordon Waitt on earlier drafts of this paper. Thank you to the journal editor and anonymous peer-reviewers for their support. This research was made possible with funding from the Australian Research Council (DE150100242).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2019.100592>.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017. Australian bureau of statistics 2016 Census. Available at: www.abs.gov.au, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience (AIDR), 2018. Australian Disaster Resilience Community Recovery Handbook. Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, East Melbourne. <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/>, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- Barnett, J., Tschakert, P., Head, L., et al., 2016. A science of loss. *Nat. Clim. Chang.* 6, 976–978.
- Bazeley, P., Jackson, K., 2013. *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*. Sage, London.
- Brown, B., 2018. *Dare to Lead*. Vermilion, London.
- Cloke, P., Beaumont, J., 2012. Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* 37, 27–51.
- Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2011. *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*. Australian Government, Canberra.
- Culmsee, P., Awati, K., 2012. Towards a holding environment: building shared understanding and commitment in projects. *Int. J. Manag. Proj. Bus.* 5, 528–548.
- Dominey-Howes, D., Gorman-Murray, A., McKinnon, S., 2016. Emergency management response and recovery plans in relation to sexual and gender minorities in New South Wales, Australia. *Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduct.* 16, 1–11.
- Dora, V. della, 2018. Intrafractal geographies: making, unmaking and remaking sacred space. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* 42, 44–71.
- Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), 2018. *Emergency Management Manual Victoria*. Victoria State Government, Melbourne. <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/policies/emmv>, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- Eriksen, C., 2014. *Gender and Wildfire: Landscapes of Uncertainty*. Routledge, New York; London.
- Eriksen, C., Ditrich, T., 2015. The relevance of mindfulness practice for trauma-exposed disaster researchers. *Emotion, Space and Society* 17, 63–69.
- Eriksen, C., Gill, N., 2010. Bushfire and everyday life: examining the awareness-action 'gap' in changing rural landscapes. *Geoforum* 41, 814–825.
- Eriksen, C., Head, L., 2014. Guest editorial: geographical fire research in Australia - overview and prospects. *Geogr. Res.* 52, 1–5.
- Eriksen, C., Simon, G., 2017. The affluence-vulnerability interface: intersecting scales of risk, privilege and disaster. *Environ. Plan.* 49, 293–313.
- Fraser, R., Waitt, G., 2016. Pain, politics and volunteering in tourism studies. *Ann. Tourism Res.* 57, 176–189.
- Gaillard, J.C., 2010. Vulnerability, capacity and resilience: perspectives for climate and development policy. *J. Int. Dev.* 22, 218–232.
- Gaillard, J.C., Texier, P., 2010. Religions, natural hazards, and disasters: an introduction. *Religion* 40, 81–84.
- Gill, N., Dun, O., Brennan-Horley, C., et al., 2015. Landscape preferences, amenity, and bushfire risk in New South Wales, Australia. *Environ. Manag.* 56, 738–753.
- Graham, S., Barnett, J., Mortreux, C., et al., 2018. Local values and fairness in climate change adaptation: insights from marginal rural Australian communities. *World Dev.* 108, 332–343.
- Head, L., 2016. *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene: Re-conceptualising Human-Nature Relations*. Routledge, New York.
- Heifetz, R.A., Linsky, M., 2002. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston.
- Holloway, J., 2003. Make-believe: spiritual practice, embodiment, and sacred space. *Environ. Plan.: Economy and Space* 35, 1961–1974.
- Klein, N., 2017. Naomi Klein: how power profits from disaster the Guardian 6 July. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/06/naomi-klein-how-power-profits-from-disaster?CMP=share_btn_tw, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- Klingorová, K., Gökarksel, B., 2017. 'God was with me everywhere': women's embodied practices and everyday experiences of sacred space in Czechia. *Gen. Place Cult.* 1–24.
- Koenig, H.G., 2010. *In the Wake of Disaster: Religious Responses to Terrorism and Catastrophe*. Templeton Foundation Press, West Conshohocken, PA.
- McCaffrey, S., 2015. Community wildfire preparedness: a global state-of-the-knowledge summary of social science research. *Current Forestry Reports* 1, 81–90.
- McCaffrey, S., Toman, E., Stidham, M., et al., 2013. Social science research related to wildfire management: an overview of recent findings and future research needs. *Int. J. Wildland Fire* 22, 15–24.
- Moritz, M.A., Batllori, E., Bradstock, R.A., et al., 2014. Learning to coexist with wildfire. *Nature* 515, 58–66.
- Nhat Hanh, T., 2015. *Silence: the Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise*. Rider, London.
- Norris, P., Inglehart, R., 2004. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- NSW Office of Emergency Management, 2018. *Welfare Services Functional Area Supporting Plan*. NSW Department of Justice, Sydney. <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Pages/publications/plans/supporting-plans/welfare-services-functional-area-supporting-plan.aspx>, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- NSW Office of Emergency Management, 2019. *Emergency management: resources and tools*. <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Pages/emergency-management/Resources-and-tools/resources-and-tools.aspx>, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- O'Neill, S.J., Handmer, J., 2012. Responding to bushfire risk: the need for transformative adaptation. *Environ. Res. Lett.* 7, 1–7.
- Osofsky, J.D., 2008. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: a personal story of a psychologist from New Orleans. *Prof. Psychol. Res. Pract.* 39, 12–17.
- Paveglio, T.B., Edgeley, C., 2017. Community diversity and hazard events: understanding the evolution of local approaches to wildfire. *Nat. Hazards* 87, 1083.
- Polykala, 2018. What is adaptive leadership? Available at: <http://polykala.com/what-is-adaptive-leadership/>, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- Prior, T., Eriksen, C., 2013. Wildfire preparedness, community cohesion and social-ecological systems. *Glob. Environ. Chang.* 23, 1575–1586.
- Pyne, S.J., 2006. *The Still-Burning Bush*. Scribe Publications Pty Ltd, Carlton North, Victoria.
- Rickards, L., 2016. Goodbye Gondwana? Questioning disaster triage and fire resilience in Australia. *Aust. Geogr.* 47, 127–137.
- Riessman, C.K., 2006. *Narrative analysis*. In: Jupp, V. (Ed.), *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, London, pp. 186–189.
- Robinson, S., 2014. *Ministry in Disaster Settings: Lessons from the Edge*, eBook. Emergency Ministry.
- Roth, F., Eriksen, C., Prior, T., 2017. Understanding the root causes of natural disasters. *The Conversation* 27 June. <https://theconversation.com/understanding-the-root-causes-of-natural-disasters-80017>, Accessed date: 17 January 2019.
- Salzberg, S., 2002. *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*. Riverhead Books, New York.
- Schipper, E.L.F., 2010. Religion as an integral part of determining and reducing Climate Change and Disaster Risk: an agenda for research. In: Voss, M. (Ed.), *Climate Change: the Social Science Perspective*. VS-Verlag, Wiesbaden, Germany, pp. 377–393.
- Sewell, T., Stephens, R.E., Dominey-Howes, D., et al., 2016. Disaster declarations associated with bushfires, floods and storms in New South Wales, Australia between 2004 and 2014. *Sci. Rep.* 6, 36369.
- Solnit, R., 2009. *A Paradise Built in Hell: the Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. Penguin Books, London.
- Stern, G., 2007. *Can God Intervene? How Religion Explains Natural Disasters*. Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT.
- Sword-Daniels, V., Eriksen, C., Hudson-Doyle, E.E., et al., 2018. Embodied Uncertainty: living with complexity and natural hazards. *J. Risk Res.* 21, 290–307.
- Tse, J.K.H., 2014. Grounded theologies: 'Religion' and the 'secular' in human geography. *Prog. Hum. Geogr.* 38, 201–220.
- Ward, A., 2008. Beyond the Instructional Mode: creating a holding environment for learning about the use of self. *J. Soc. Work. Pract.* 22, 67–83.
- Wilding, J., 2017. Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK: from centres of concentration to a better holding environment. *Int. J. Refug. Law* 29, 270–291.
- Wilson, G.A., 2013. Community resilience, social memory and the post-2010 Christchurch (New Zealand) earthquakes. *Area* 45, 207–215.
- Winnicott, D.W., 2018. *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers (Karnac Classics)*. Routledge, Abingdon (First published in 1958 by Tavistock Publications Ltd).
- Wisner, B., 2010. Untapped potential of the world's religious communities for disaster reduction in an age of accelerated climate change: an epilogue and prologue. *Religion* 40, 128–131.
- Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., et al., 2004. *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*. Routledge, London.