

# **Interrogating resilience and exploring the agency within affect**

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## **Abstract**

In this article I discuss the role that emotions have on shaping responses to disasters, based on interviews with people who experienced bushfire and flood in 2019 and 2020 in New South Wales, Australia. At the time of the research, state and federal disaster management strategies implored individuals to be self-responsible, independent, and accountable, under the broad concept of ‘resilience’. I argue that resilience rhetoric espouses notions of acting 'stoically' and being self-reliant in the context of disasters – which I locate as being connected with historical understandings of Australian national identity– and can be dismissive of emotions, as barriers or non-pertinent in recovery efforts. I problematise the notion of resilience by challenging the presumption that its corollary, vulnerability, and emotions more broadly, belong to a non-agentive category. I discuss how emotions can mould both individual and collective responses to disasters and find that experiences of anger, feeling forgotten, and being traumatized can be factors that motivate people to act.

## **Key words**

Resilience; affect; emotions; disasters; vulnerability

## Problematising the concept of resilience

Originating within the discipline of psychology (that is, Werner's longitudinal study of youth, 1982), resilience is generally understood as perseverance, endurance or survival in the context of adversity, change or stress. The term resilience has emerged in disaster discourse as a positive and empowering approach that enables one to cope with the effects of disasters such as bushfires and floods. Within the disaster context, resilience is often portrayed as a goal or ideal way to manage hazards, as seen in works by Gil-Rivas and Kilmer (2016), Liu-Lastres and Cahyanto (2023), and Soomro (2023). 'Bouncing back' is central to resilience discourse (Aldunce et al, 2014) and 'robustness' and 'adaptability' have been proposed as crucial elements in disaster recovery. Schweitzer (et al 2022) have argued that resilience encompasses not only the ability to withstand the stressor but also to be flexible and learn from it. Various dimensions and attributes of resilience have been discussed (demonstrated in the works of Drakaki, Kovács, and Tzionas 2023; Leitch and Bohensky 2014; Schweitzer et al. 2022) as have measures and indicators of resilience (for example Frijters et al. 202 and Gu et al, 2023). Certainly, these processes have a practical place in disaster support strategies (for example in Shadowen et al. 2020; Ruszczuk et al. 2020).

As a concept, resilience continues to be examined due to diverse applications and lexical slippage. Specific discussions cogitate on what it is (Anderson, 2015) and its position within the neoliberal security paradigm (Kruger 2019). Martha Fineman argues that 'no one is born resilient. Rather, resilience is produced within and through institutions and relationships that confer privilege and power' (2023). Fineman's claim is drawn from the position that humans experience the world in diverse ways and one's capacity to be resilient, bounce back and be self-reliant is influenced by external and internal constraints and conditions that can restrict or support one's ability to act, protect themselves or manage their disaster situation. In this article I query the supposition that individuals *are able* to be resilient and be 'robust' when faced with stressors like disasters and natural hazards (as distinct from the moral argument that one *should* be able to overcome them). I argue that resilience is not easily obtained or achieved for three main reasons: there are complex and various factors that influence one's ability to be resilient; not all people possess the necessary skills, support and/or structures to defeat, endure or survive a disaster event; there are not a set of defined strategies that can 'fix' or deal with the disaster experience. Individuals are not inherently autonomous or self-determining, they are interpellated by a complex interplay of systems and dynamics, with varying degrees of

primacy, of which their subjectivity is constructed through. Many cascading and intersectional factors, including economic, political, ideological, cultural, geographical and social, contribute to one's capacity to act and protect themselves in the event of a disaster, as noted by Makleff (et al. 2022), who argues those who struggle to 'be resilient' often have multiple constraints. Indeed, those who experience precarity or various types of constraints are not inevitably passive nor do they predictably acquiesce to a challenging situation or stressor. Such a position neglects to see the ways in which people are able to act with agency.

The concept of resilience in Australia can be found in historic understandings of Australian national identity, stemming in particular from the Depression periods of the 1890s and 1930s and also relating to memories and recollections of life during the First and Second World Wars. It is concomitant with the characterisation of 'the Aussie Battler'; the image of the Australian hero who survives whilst 'doing it tough' (following Taussig 1992). Post-World War II, resilience has become associated with class and economic position and the promotion of working-class people who struggle but endure. The emphasis on 'looking after yourself' can imply that vulnerability and emotions more broadly, are a deficit category or condition to be overcome, in order to reach the goal of 'strength' or at the very least, be unencumbered by emotions, based on the assumption that, if affect is suppressed, one can endure and be 'robust'. For example, Rushton et al (2021) found that men 'silence' their emotional distress in their disaster responses and their actions are shaped by conventions of masculinity and stoicism. Feminist theory has provided significant critiques of social norms that ignore or deny the role of emotions in social and political worlds. Judith Butler has discussed vulnerability in the context of political resistance and argues that vulnerability is 'neither fully passive or active' (2016a:25) but relational. Although their research differs in many ways, both Judith Butler and Martha Fineman connect their discussions of vulnerability with neoliberalism (also evident in Butler 2016b), with Fineman arguing that liberalism 'bestows unequal conditions' (2011:167), as they separately critique formal structures that perpetuate processes and systems that dominate and obfuscate responsibility.

### **Affect and causative action**

Research that explores links between emotion and action is emergent (see for example the emotional concept of 'solastalgia' in Albrecht et al. 2007). Weber, Guenther, & Claus (1978) conceptualise 'affectional action' as being an emotional impulse that drives behaviour, though this is framed as being less 'intentional action' but rather an uncontrollable response. This

appears to be based on the idea that people only act with intention for rational reasons. In this article I explore how emotions, often messy and unbounded, can instigate deliberate and purposeful action. Jasper (2011) for example, has connected emotions with the activities of social movements – as drivers of action in mobilisation efforts. Comparably, Solnit (2009) has identified that feelings of joy and comradery are felt when neighbors work together to provide care in a disaster aftermath. I posit that emotions can serve as one catalyst for action and need not be framed as a deficit or non-agentive category, or one that is unproductive and limiting, cancelling the potential for them to be contribute to one’s sense of endurance.

Further consideration of emotions uncovers their potential dividual application: they can be shared across groups in societies and are not necessarily individual, isolated experiences. Emotions are constructed, expressed, and regulated along axes of social and cultural differentiation. For example, Hochschild contended that different cultures have distinct norms and expectations regarding emotional expression and management. She developed the concepts of ‘feeling rules’ and ‘display rules’ (1979) to distinguish between the feelings one hides, and the feelings that are socially acceptable to ‘show’. Similarly, Scheff (2015) explored the relationship between the maintenance of social order and the containment of emotions. Whilst positivist approaches tend to emphasize the individual as Curti et al. (2011) have noted, the aforementioned studies demonstrate the collective potential of emotions, underscoring how ‘stoicism’ and ‘resilience’ have become embedded and perpetuated into collective Australian identity, social norms and opportunistically espoused by the disaster sector.

## **Context and methods**

This study was undertaken with people living in communities that have experienced disasters in peri-urban and regional New South Wales (henceforth NSW) in 2019/2020 fire season in NSW. At this time, the NSW emergency response taskforce was managed by Resilience NSW, an executive agency within the NSW government (NSW Government, 2023) which espoused individualised practices and logic.

My analysis draws from fifteen semi-structured interviews I undertook over three months. All interviews involved a narrative that recounted their experience of disaster. Recruitment of participants occurred through email or hard copy invitation distributed by the local community development worker, community resilience officer or community service organisation. Residents responded to the invitation by contacting me directly or through the community

worker. After several interviews were undertaken through referrals, residents then began to contact me directly, after hearing about the research from their local networks (such as face to face conversations and community groups on social media). Fourteen resident interviews were conducted via telephone or Zoom and one was typed and emailed (and one resident provided both written and a Zoom interview). Interviews lasted an hour on average; however, several lasted for ninety minutes. Interviews began with the location of the resident and the disaster/s they experienced.

I undertook a thematic analysis of the interviews using the NVivo 1.6.2 software program that analyses words as symbols. I considered the factors that prompted their use, the actions they were connected with and the context they developed from. I used a grounded method that enabled me to identify the themes within the participants' experiences. A total of three coding cycles were completed for the entire cohort, and codes were condensed and expanded. Sub codes were created which further distilled issues and enabled grouping of shared and distinct experiences and perspectives; akin to Saldana's 'lumping and splitting' (2013).

As an anthropologist who usually adopts ethnography and observation to relativise human behaviour, I struggled to analyse words alone through the software program for four reasons: I have found in colloquial language lexical indexes are not always understood as having the same meaning between two people; one word can not always encapsulate a mood or feeling; the number of times a word is used does not necessarily indicate its significance; analysing words alone disregards other sensory data, such as gestures, facial expressions, tone and intonation which are important factors in understanding someone's experience. Therefore, to situate my NVivo analysis, in this article I have crafted case studies based on the narratives. Although the case studies only provide a small window into experience, they add more context to the role emotions play in people's lives (following the work of Lutz & White, 1986).

### **Affect and action in disasters**

The NVivo analysis identified twenty-five shared emotions amongst the residents, of which the most prevalent were: anger (n=10), forgotten (n=12) and traumatised (n=11). Other emotions were abandonment (n=2), grief (n=3) stress (n=4) supported (n=3). In the paragraphs ahead I discuss the three most conspicuous emotions.

## **Forgotten**

‘Forgotten’ was mentioned on twelve occasions. It was used in the context of being forgotten on recovery lists from support services, by the government generally and by the Rural Fire Service:

You will find a lot of people saying the same, that we’re forgotten, that nobody does anything. (Resident 2)

But I still, and I am very strong on this one – we were let down, we were forgotten. (Resident 15)

I’ve been ringing our recovery officer saying, “Make sure I’m on that list because I’m not going to be forgotten again.” (Resident 2)

We all felt not good because the council is making decisions about where money would go without involving us. (Resident 10)

There was an overall sense of being forgotten from individual residents who felt they had little control or input into community mitigation or recovery efforts. This emotion was also associated with a sense of fear of the physical danger that the fire could cause. The sentiment of abandonment was entrenched in the residents’ words, with residents lamenting a lack of action and attention. When residents felt overlooked, they reported doing things for themselves:

So, I’m thinking council is not doing this, they’re not listening to me, we need to do this. (Resident 2)

Residents took matters into their own hands when they perceived neglect and in acting they were able to gain some control.

## **Karen and the agapanthus**

At the time we spoke, Karen’s roof had not been rebuilt. She explained to me that her town was still unmentioned as an official site that was burnt in the 2019 bushfires: contributing to her sense of being forgotten. Although her neighbours knew the fire was coming, and she had evacuated her chickens some six weeks before it came through, she was astounded at how her community was overlooked. She had been on her property for twenty-one years and she knew what to do. She cleared the gutters and the roof of debris and she placed buckets of water around her deck. The hose was permanently on the roof, guided by a ladder:

I put 30,000 litres of precious drought water into the gardens leading up to the fire [...] those agapanthus, the fire brigade said, they actually stopped the fire

getting up to my house because they held so much water and they were quite thick and overgrown and they slowed the fire.

For eight weeks, she picked up every leaf and stick from her property. Despite her 'resilient' behaviour and her fire preparations, Karen felt overlooked, and she expressed a sense of abandonment and loneliness in the aftermath. She still felt forgotten because there was not enough aerial support, fire trucks on the ground and help afterwards, 'we just felt quite abandoned and quite alone' she explained. Her frustration and anger at feeling forgotten motivated her to act. She went on to express how this feeling led her to do something:

We're now all so angry and so committed to this that we're just going to keep pushing and trying and pushing and trying until we get done what we need to get done but there's no groups that can help us.

Sorry for my anger but it's been the most frustrating thing and it's just not seeming to be working.

In her efforts to become more informed and more in control when faced with another bushfire, Karen and fellow residents formed their own community organization, seeking to address the lack of support and recognition they experienced:

We don't get bushfire funding money. We don't even get mentioned in the bushfire books. We seriously are forgotten and it hasn't helped with people's mental health in the recovery from the bushfire. We have just put in - as an association, we've put in for a grant. So, we've got ourselves organised.

They started a group to build relationships and connections within the community, to collectively prepare for the next disaster and manage their response on their own. Despite challenges such as securing funding, the group remains committed to working together to prepare for the next fire season. Karen's emotional experience of being forgotten informed her determination to build their own support systems and prepare collectively for future disasters.

## **Traumatised**

'Traumatised' was mentioned eleven times in relation to the disaster event and in the aftermath. One resident spoke about layers of trauma from recurrent disasters and another resident summarised the feeling of collective trauma:

We are living through it every day. We're all at various stages of recovering both physically and emotionally, however I can assure you that everyone is suffering with varying degrees of mental illness, PTSD. It saddens me to share that I know that some

members of our community have considered suicide, and that all of us have struggled this year to function constantly, and some days function at all. (Resident 15)

One resident explained how a few days prior to the fire's arrival, she spent one evening on the phone to her friends' children as the fire came toward their house, several villages away. Their parents couldn't get to the property and they were at home alone. She hung on the line, talking them through the situation. This was traumatic for all of them.

Other perceptions of trauma were experienced in recovery efforts, such as reviewing insurance documents and photographs of burnt homes, revisiting burnt sites and engaging in 'endless red tape' associated with support services. On these occasions, such processes made residents re-live the event they were still in the processes of emotionally reconciling. One resident spoke about their inability to simultaneously deal with and process their immediate needs and support the community's rebuilding endeavors:

I'm too traumatised trying to deal with what's happening in my own backyard to be thinking big picture community stuff at the moment, but I don't want our community to miss out on these grants. (Resident 2)

### **Simone and her horse**

At the time of our interview, Simone had completed about half of her fence repairs herself: 'it keeps you fit' she told me. Simone lives by herself and knew she had to 'be resilient' living where she did. A few hours before the fire got to her property, her neighbours came over and told her they were all going down to a safe house, but she chose to stay with her house and her horse. After her neighbours left, Simone went to their property and watered it down, 'just in case'. She also moved her horse up toward her house and stayed beside her all night. She watched trees crashing and falling and everything burning around them. She watched black smoke engulf her horse float:

The fire came through with a front that was about 100 foot high and it was like a steam train. And it came from all directions. I've been fighting fires my whole life and this was something I have never been involved with. It was just extraordinary. Everybody was quite – how can I say it? I think we were all in shock.

The next morning, she raced to the closest Bunnings to purchase a generator. They were sold out and so she drove another seventy-one kilometres to the next Bunnings. She called her insurance company to get a new power poles and wires. She organised trees to be chopped down so the trucks could enter the property. She had to rebuild all her sheds because the quotes



and contractors she had have offered amounts that are ‘highway robbery’. She continues to rebuild all her fences herself because she didn’t want to pay large amounts to outside contractors: ‘they see grey hair and they think they can take you for a song.’ In spite of her shock, Simone did not want to be taken advantage of and acted to save her life and livelihood.

Simone’s emotional experience played an important part in influencing her actions. Her decision to attend to her neighbours’ property underscores the emotional connection and sense of communal responsibility she felt. The emotional and relational bond with her horse, prompted Simone to stay with her throughout the night, demonstrating a commitment to the well-being of her animal. Simone's emotions continue to guide her actions. Faced with challenges such as power outages and the need for rebuilding, her determination to protect her property and livelihood is fueled by a mix of frustration and a refusal to be taken advantage of. This serves as a factor behind her resourcefulness and proactive approach in obtaining supplies and rebuilding. Simone's experience underscores how emotions, ranging from shock, care to frustration and determination, can act as powerful motivators, shaping decisions and actions in the face of adversity.

### **Anger**

The word anger was expressed on ten occasions regarding how people perceived the disaster was managed. In his physical theory of emotions, Scheff notes that frustration is the stimulus for anger (2015:463). Participants mentioned they felt frustrated by support services, when houses were looted, toward poor distribution of government funding, when Rural Fire Service staff minimised their experiences, and when trees were chopped down on properties without permission. These examples indicate loss of control for residents as well as the lack of recognition and inclusion in recovery processes. They also highlight the absence of collaboration and consultation between support services and residents – some of whom have lived in the community for up to fifty years.

### **Max and the politicians**

When I first met Max, she bundled out of a minivan ready to confront politicians at the NSW state parliament about what her community needed. That day, checked shirts, steel capped boots and Khaki pants met with monotone suits. Her community had a high level of anger toward local government and emergency agencies. We had spoken through zoom some weeks earlier. Whenever we spoke, she clearly articulated the mismatch between government policy,

community services and community needs. She was angry and she believed her community had been overlooked and underfunded. She wanted permanent roadside water supply and 100,000 litre concrete collection tanks with fittings that allow Rural Fire Service and NSW Fire and Rescue trucks to refill from. She wanted vegetation clearings, safe refilling stations, designated evacuation centres and ongoing property protection education for residents. She had applied for grants, created petitions and videos, and lobbied, all driven by her determination to make change.

Max's story serves as an illustration of how anger can drive action in the aftermath of a disaster. Max, and others already mentioned, were frustrated by their experiences of neglect and they took proactive steps to address the issues. Max's anger propelled her to confront politicians at the NSW state parliament where she advocated for her community's needs to state and federal politicians. Max's specific demands for infrastructure, such as water supplies and designated evacuation centers, demonstrated how anger can be a powerful stimulus for action. In Max's case, anger served as a motivating force that led to active and persistent advocacy on behalf of her community's interests.

### **The contours of resilience and affect**

The experiences of Karen, Simone and Max illustrate how emotions influenced their responses to challenging situations in intentional ways. Anger, trauma, and the feeling of being forgotten acted as catalysts, mobilising them to take action, to ensure the same experience was not repeated, effectively making affect a paradoxical foundation for resilience. These individuals transformed their feelings of anger, trauma, and neglect into deliberate actions, demonstrating the transformative potential of emotions in terms of moving from being encumbered, to being unencumbered. Anger compelled Max to fight for her community's needs, Karen's sense of being forgotten led her to initiate a community group and Simone's trauma and nurturant connections compelled her to stay committed to her horse and her neighbours.

Of course, emotions can also be incapacitating and hinder one's capacity to act. Whilst there is not always a causal relationship between emotions and actions, emotions can be a contributing factor in action. As I have also noted, one's capacity *to* act is influenced by factors such as access to resources, economic positioning and support systems. While anger, neglect, and trauma may fuel the desire for change, structural and systemic barriers continue.

Resilience is expected and celebrated in Australian emergency management services and government rhetoric. Neoliberalism supports behavior and strategies that promote stoicism and independence in individual behaviour. Fundamentally an etic concept and practice, resilience is utilised by government systems to encourage survival and eschew responsibility. Ongoing application of resilience rhetoric cultivates an acceptance of systems that perpetuate insecurity. While self-sufficiency is pragmatic in disaster-prone areas, it is imperative that more understanding develop around supporting the range of capacities, emotions and differences that communities and individuals experience.

Vulnerability and emotions can coexist with resilience. When individuals and communities experience trauma, neglect and anger, a collective sense of purpose can emerge. Feelings of being unheard or unseen can foster unity –as well as isolation and inaction– prompting people to join together to instigate change. It is necessary to critique understandings of 'resilience' when they overlook the complexity of human experiences and relations and place undue responsibility on individuals and communities, effectively diverting attention and responsibility away from government structures and formal programs. As highlighted by Fineman, acknowledging vulnerability does not negate agency (2023), rather it recognizes the interplay that is possible between emotions and action. Social and cultural constructions and preconceptions of what resilience means and looks like need to be reconsidered. Building emotional knowledge in governance structures could be one way to acknowledge the role of emotions, as messy, uncontained and shifting as they may be. Pertinent here is that endurance and survival exist within vulnerability, as does agency within affect.

NB: All names in this article are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of those I listened to.

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