Resettled Refugee Communities’ Experiences of the Canterbury Earthquakes and the Role of Belonging

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a qualitative study with multiple refugee background communities living in Christchurch, New Zealand about their perspectives and responses to the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010-2011 (32 semi-structured interviews and 11 focus group discussions comprising 112 participants). Whilst the Canterbury earthquakes created significant challenges for the entire region, several refugee background communities found multiple ways to effectively respond to such adversity. Central to this response were their experiences of belonging which were comprised of both ‘civic’ and ‘ethno’ conceptualisations. This discussion includes an analysis on the intersectionality of identity to highlight the gendered, contextual and chronological influences that impact people’s perspectives of and responses to a disaster. As the study was conducted over 18 months, the paper discusses how social capital resources and experiences of belonging can help inform urban disaster risk reduction (DRR) with refugee groups.

Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 51.2 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2013 as a result of persecution [1]. Approximately 16.7 million of these people were refugees with nearly 100,000 being provided the opportunity to resettle in more than twenty resettlement countries. New Zealand currently accepts 750 refugees on an annual basis as part of its resettlement program.

The city of Christchurch experienced four major earthquakes and thousands of aftershocks between 2010 and 2011. On February 22, 2011 the largest earthquake occurred that caused 185 fatalities and widespread destruction to the central business district and residential areas. Several years later, the recovery process continues with ongoing and significant housing, infrastructure and planning based challenges. Prior to the earthquakes, Christchurch was a primary refugee resettlement locality for a number of ethically defined communities. Though refugees are not inherently vulnerable, numerous factors can exacerbate vulnerability in disaster contexts. These may include their forced migration experiences, linguistic competencies in the host language, limited social networks, acceptance by the wider society, discrimination and opportunities/ability to acculturate to a new country’s customs and laws. In relation, numerous studies acknowledge the importance of social capital resources in the disaster literature [2]. Putnam’s theory of social capital identifies and describes the different types of relationships forged by individuals and

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communities: bonding, bridging and linking [3]. *Bonding* relationships occur between individuals of the same refugee/ethnic/socio-economic/demographic community that provide strong social connections and meaningful social support. *Bridging* relationships are associations created between individuals from different communities (weak social ties) that can connect people to new resources, opportunities and sources of information. *Linking* relationships are networks created between individuals or communities and institutional or authoritative structures. Together, these social capital resources can provide communities often marginalized or excluded in disaster contexts access to information, solidarity networks and new opportunities thereby highlighting the integral roles that multiple groups (individuals, families, communities and institutions) play in disaster preparedness and mitigation [4,5].

Acknowledging the relationship with the social capital literature, Fozdar and Hartley distinguish between two types of belonging: civic and ethno [6]. *Civic* belonging refers to a person’s ability to participate in society through activities such as employment, voting and accessing health services and entitlements such as social security. *Ethno* belonging refers to a more affective connection between people (including the wider society) that comes from shared history, memories and facing a common future. This extended abstract employs these forms of belonging alongside the conceptualizations of social capital to examine the implications of DRR for refugee groups.

**Study Design**

This study documented refugee background communities’ responses to the 2010–2011 earthquakes and their perspectives of belonging before, during and after these events. A particular study strength was that refugee background peer researchers were trained and employed to conduct focus groups and semi-structured interviews and to ensure the analysis was accountable [7]. The recruitment process was done via a third-party approach, predominantly through community leaders from refugee backgrounds. In total, 112 participants participated in the study. Most participants came from four primary countries of origin (Afghan, Bhutanese, Ethiopian and Somali) with near equal representations of men and women. Discussions were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed through a process of initial and focused coding in order to develop key themes and then create increasingly analytic memos. The study received approval from the University of Auckland’s ethics committee.

**Results**

Overall, the participant comments highlight the importance of belonging for urban DRR as they noted the emergence, destabilisation and possibilities of this concept as civic and ethno based forms overtime. Before the earthquakes, belonging was predominantly a civic sentiment about jobs, education and particular entitlements through citizenship. After the major earthquakes of 2011, participants again spoke about civic belonging and the promise of further participation in the rebuild. They also noted a new form ethno belonging where they knew their neighbours for the first time as the earthquakes provided a context in which a common adversity created a shared narrative and a sense of cohesion. By late 2012 to early 2013, however, participants no longer spoke about this ethno belonging and noted that support came almost entirely from their ethnic community. They also noted that they had largely been left out of the economic opportunities of the Christchurch rebuild and recovery and thus civic notions of belonging had
also decreased. These dynamics influenced people’s decisions to stay or leave Christchurch and had significant impacts on particular ethnically defined communities – especially those that were relatively small in size. Gender was also a consideration as the men spoke about belonging primarily as civic sentiment. Conversely, women were more likely to speak about an ethnic belonging (distinct from a wider ethno version) as being the most helpful in responding to the earthquakes.

Almost all participants noted that their strongest support before, during and after the earthquakes were from their own ethnic community as a form of bonding social capital and highlights the importance of community driven DRR that is supported by relevant agencies and institutions [8]. The observation from participants that they have largely not been able to meaningfully participate in the Christchurch regeneration and rebuild has meant that they have found finding work and opportunities to connect with the wider society difficult. These challenges suggest structural concerns that include discrimination. Whilst bonding capital within communities remains a significant resource, the opportunities of ethno and civic belonging alongside access to bridging and linking capital have proved more elusive.

**Discussion**

The theoretical constructs of social capital and belonging provide relational and structural perspectives on DRR praxis with refugee groups. The ways in which the participants spoke about belonging as statements relating to their relationships with wider society and their associated opportunities to participate within it highlight that this concept requires gendered, chronological and contextual lenses. Civic and ethno belonging are influenced by time, gender, size of the associated refugee background community, the amount of time resettled and importantly, the wider society’s acceptance of them. Those involved with DRR from community engagement, emergency response and policy development can work collaboratively with refugee groups towards making more inclusive spaces within and across civil society. The need for proactive mapping of community assets, capacities and vulnerabilities is particularly important as any locality may have a number of refugee background communities that can have significant differences with its preparations, interpretations and responses to a given disaster and relationship with the wider society [9]. And likewise, a time-based analysis shows that civic belonging can help communities sustain themselves but requires wider awareness of the experiences of ethnic discrimination and exacerbated structural disadvantage.

Though refugees often face new challenges adapting to a host society, it is necessary to extend an analysis of these communities beyond vulnerabilities and recognise that they can significantly contribute to DRR. Seeing that refugees have already survived situations of persecution, refugee groups could also help inform and build capacity within the wider society about effective DRR, particularly in the immediacy of a major disaster. Whilst vulnerability considers individual and community susceptibilities to a hazard [10], a focus on their capacities not only makes refugee communities active participants in DRR but also provides opportunities for wider engagements and relationships with civil society. The corresponding role of belonging is central in making these capacities more effective in a disaster context.
Limitations and Future Directions

The applicability of civic and ethno belonging with refugee communities will likely vary depending on its particular demographics, time settled, location, proximity to natural hazards and relationship with the wider host society, government agencies and non-government organizations. This study would also benefit from research that examines other aspects that influence belonging such as spirituality, technological literacies and the voices of children. Further longitudinal research that develops baseline measures on wellbeing and social cohesion would provide greater awareness of how the experience of settlement for culturally and linguistically diverse populations can influence and inform DRR initiatives over time.

Conclusions

As Japan, New Zealand and the United States all have formal refugee resettlement programs, this paper makes an important contribution to DRR as there is limited local and international literature that focuses on resettled refugees. Seeing that more than 450,000 refugees have been resettled globally in the last five years alone as part of country sponsored resettlement initiatives, there is an urgent need to develop greater understandings of what informs disaster preparedness and mitigation. The necessity for proactive mapping of community based vulnerabilities and assets are clear as disasters often exacerbate existing forms marginalisation. In relation, the concept of belonging remains an under-theorised concept within the disaster literature that requires an analysis of particular refugee background communities, the wider society and associated institutions. Differentiating belonging over time and its different forms across socio-cultural-political dimensions provides helpful ways to conceptualise effective DRR with culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

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References